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# **Playing a Double Game: Idioms of Same Sex Desire in India**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in South Asian Studies

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I have read and understood regulation 17.9 of the Regulations for students of the School of Oriental and African Studies concerning plagiarism. I undertake that all the material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination.

Signed: Akhil Katyal

Date: 10<sup>th</sup> August, 2011

## Abstract

This thesis argues for the multiplicity of idioms of same-sex desire in modern India, treating 'homo-sexuality' as only one of them. Moreover, it argues for the fundamental doubleness of the specific historical idiom of 'sexuality' itself, that is, its ability to *always leave room* for manoeuvre, discrepancy and mixture.

This thesis, in looking at the human actors in the drama of 'sexuality', that is, at the debates and strategies of the editors of the books on 'queer politics' and 'gay writing', at the overwrought profiles of the individual users of gay social networking websites and at the tactical personal narratives written for sexuality-based activist publications, argues that each of these actors use sexual identity in a double way. Their strategic decisions, their everyday lives and their texts, make it clear that sexual identity does a particular work for them without overdetermining their self-images, either exhaustively or consistently. I see this *necessary distance* between the adoption and the use of sexual identity both as deeply political and as a valuable analytical point.

In modern India, numerous idioms of same-sex desire, such as that of *baazi* (habit, addiction) which I elaborate at some length, of friendship, of *masti* (fun, play), of love, among others, are simultaneous to and relate to the idiom of sexuality. I look at how these relations actually get worked out in texts, in politics and in social lives, which are full of concerns of and beyond sexual desire. This thesis moves from a conceptual sublimity to everyday practice and it uses the latter as a vantage point to revise the idea of sexual identity from being a limit, a marker, a stigmata to being a form of play, a tool, a double game.

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## Disjointing Contemporary India: Idioms of Same-Sex Desire - An Introduction

‘मुवाफ़िकत से पहले सारी मुखालिफ़त देख-रेख कर लेनी चाहिए’ (‘Before looking for parity, we must take stock of all the disparities’) – Ismat Chughtai (1998: 205)<sup>1</sup>

### Why the Double Game? Why Doubleness at All: A Conversation with akshay khanna

One of the last works that I read while writing this thesis was another thesis by a friend akshay khanna.<sup>2</sup> In my early years of being part of ‘sexuality’ activism in Delhi, akshay was someone I knew of partially, someone that my other activist friends knew better, someone with whom they had spent a good deal of time debating about their everyday political choices as activists, working on petitions, thinking through strategies, organizing protests, he was someone whom they had loved, fought and bantered with and listened to. In those years, between 2006 and 2008, akshay was in and out of Delhi doing fieldwork for his own PhD thesis that he was to submit later in Edinburgh as *A Refracted Subject: Sexualness in the realms of Law and Epidemiology*.<sup>3</sup> The thesis reflected akshay to the bone, someone who I had come to know a little better during my years in London, it reflected his passion and politics, and above all, his

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<sup>1</sup> All Hindi words and passages in this thesis, written or quoted in the Devanagiri script, have been supplied with my own English translations, unless otherwise mentioned. When Hindi words are transliterated using the English Roman script, they have been consistently italicized. Often Hindi quotations appear in the transliterated English form in the original. These have been retained as transliterated and have been supplied with my own translations.

<sup>2</sup> The choice of the lower case letters for his name is akshay’s own. It is, I presume with some confidence, part of his abiding experimentation, as will become clear in the discussion of his work, with the common markers that designate the self and how we use those markers in our day to day lives. Using the upper case for our names is just one example.

<sup>3</sup> khanna, akshay, 2010, *A Refracted Subject: Sexualness in the realms of Law and Epidemiology*, PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, draft shared on email Nov. 2010.

quantum of experience and engagement with what being an activist around issues of 'sexuality' in India had meant for the last fifteen years, how it had changed, how it held both frustration and promise in equal measure.

Reading his work, I found myself at the centre of my own concerns, both theoretical and political. I got the sense of understanding further the people that inhabit my own thesis and the texts that populate it, but what was better and is true only of genuinely interesting works, I got the sense of being understood by his thesis, of finding some of my own unresolved thoughts transcribed with beautiful precision and proof. I found myself comparing notes with him, learning other halves of the same stories, agreeing, extending and disagreeing. It is fitting then that I introduce some of my major arguments through a conversation with a friend who has thought long and deeply, and with a passion and experience that excels mine, about the same people, processes and texts. We have roamed in the same 'field', it seems, but there has been an unpremeditated division of labour. My earlier disciplinary training in literary studies has as much to do with this as akshay's chosen entry point of anthropology to try and understand the complex morass of issues related to same-sex desire, activism and ideas of the self in modern India.

akshay tells the story of how the moment of 2nd of July 2009 in Delhi 'came to be' (khanna; 2010: 11). This was the now iconic day when the High Court in Delhi read down the anti-sodomy provision, the section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, to decriminalize, in no uncertain terms, adult consensual same-sex relations. akshay's story stretches back from this moment to as far back as the mid-late nineties and is pegged on the twin poles of Law and Epidemiology. It considers, above all, how activists and public health professionals made way for the queer body

to enter those registers which the State directly understands and transacts its business in, that is, those registers through which governance in liberal democracies proceeds. These are the two sublime registers of Law, where the queer body becomes, as akshay says, 'an intelligible subject vested with rights as citizen i.e. as a citizen-subject' and that of Epidemiology related with HIV-AIDS, where male queer bodies are identified, mapped and targeted as high-risk groups, that endanger the 'general population', they become groups that are to be found out and intervened with, using measures over and above the usual health services of the State (11-12). Only once such an entry is ensured, does the State take cognisance of queer bodies, their lives, wishes and experiences. Rights activists and AIDS-related NGOs, have over the last few years, facilitated this process of recognition by the State.

akshay argues that the civil society sexuality activists, in consciously using the language of human-rights and in newly invoking a hoary legal provision as a stand-in for all the day-to-day problems that the mass of queer bodies face, in constituting that piece of old legalese as a cause par excellence for all their present injury, invoke the State to recognize them, and to do something about this injured condition, now framed collectively. They thus give a 'social life' to a legal section, elevate it 'from being a pedestrian provision of law...to the status of Law [with a capital L], the realm of a grander Legality where terms of citizenship are negotiated' (118). It is only in this particular encounter with the Law, he argues, that has been playing out for the last decade or so in India, that a diverse body of activists and opinions becomes rearranged under the sign of the 'Indian queer movement', a diverse body of people find themselves represented as having a particular 'sexuality', homo or hetero, becoming a 'sexuality-type' and somehow implicitly connected for that reason, somehow articulable as one 'community', a 'minority' that

can be represented within the liberal democratic setup. What akshay is doing is interesting, both for a genealogist of sexual identities and for a political scientist interested in how democracies map their people. akshay is restaging the French writer Louis Althusser's famous scene of the policeman hailing but with a crucial play in the sequencing of Althusser's 'little theoretical theatre'.<sup>4</sup> It is in this restaging, on different terms, that akshay takes care of that niggling question of subjectivity, the question that always rears its head when you try and understand anything that has to do with same-sex desire *in relation to* the modern institutions of the liberal State, law or public health.

Instead of the subject coming into existence at the point of turning to face the call of the Law, as Althusser suggests, akshay's little historical recounting of the queer Indian activists' petition in the Delhi High Court suggests another theoretical game at hand. '[W]e are evoking the Law,

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<sup>4</sup> 'I shall then suggest,' Louis Althusser writes, 'that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'...Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'. Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theatre I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession. There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that 'it really is he' who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing' (Althusser; 1971: tr. from French by Ben Brewster).

becoming a body that Law may attach to, and *appear* to evoke/address' (136). By recovering section 377 from the annals of an unwieldy Penal Code, and scapegoating this one provision of the legal State as a major problem around our time, as an iconic flashpoint for all other day to day problems that queer people face, 'we become Subjects in order to evoke the Law...ironically, we do this in order to obviate the power of that Law to evoke us as Subjects'. In other words, we know how Law works, so we use it by temporarily taking the face that it knows best, of a representable community of people with points of similarity and with a shared injury. akshay – himself a trained lawyer from the National Law School in Bangalore which has been a substantial trigger point of queer legal activism in India for more than a decade now, and whose students have gone onto become editors of queer activist anthologies, writers of much critical non-fiction on queer debates in India or lawyers in the High Court case against section 377 – delves into the debates among the activists, lawyers and NGOs that went in drafting the petitions that finally won the Delhi verdict, debates that unmistakably evidence the consciousness of performing a specific version of citizen-subjecthood by these real-time actors. This taking over faces did not mean that outside law courts, that outside the legal register, the same face will necessarily persist, or to the same effect.

This sort of restaging of Althusser's scene has immense theoretical and political consequences. It opens up the field. It launches us onto our primary metaphor of the double game. The main conceit in this restaging, after all, is the opening up of a *distancing mechanism*. Of a knowledge that while one thing is happening, something else is also simultaneously underway. Of the capability of placing one's own utterances into perspective. It establishes an irreducible distance between the activists' role in relation to Law and their role outside this relation,

between a strategic decision to use identity/rights frameworks on grounds of urgency and the (possibility of a) longer, simultaneous politics of queerness, between using something and adopting it wholesale, between playing a one trick pony and playing a double game. Only the metaphor of the double game understands sexual identity not within the terms of some deep-seated psychic truth, not as an autobiographical reference that knows you inside out, not as a universal given, but instead as a *deployment*. As a particular deployment within a given temporal field. Which is why akshay introduces his titular conceit of refraction, proposing a model of political-sexual subjectivity where the subject is always necessarily refracted, where it always finds place and meaning in the ebb and flow of what I have called the 'double game'.

In this thesis, I want to take this a step further. I want to read this *refraction* back into the very structure of sexual identity, into the way it is lived out. I propose that the everyday usage of sexual identity is *always* a double gesture, will always remain so. That it *always leaves room* for other idioms of desire to be at work, ones that are not identitarian, ones that are not even autobiographical in their drive. That if we are serious about its practical role as a deployment, then to be honest to the work that practicality does in people's everyday lives, we will have to *read it in* into the structural definition of sexual identity, into the very way we fundamentally conceptualize it. We will have to understand sexual identity as a temporal double game, as always unexhaustive, as always stopping short of being able to completely determine a person, as not always working in the same way or in the same direction, as always already qualified, lending itself to disaggregation, to being shown its place in the scheme of things. Let me explain this with another argument that is central to akshay's thesis, that is, his distinction between *sexuality* and *sexualness*. A distinction that, as I argue in this thesis, becomes untenable once

we step out of the *sublimity* of the encounter with Law and Epidemiology and into the field of everydayness, even into the very everydayness of that encounter. This untenability, I must mention, remains radically acknowledged within akshay's thesis.

He uses *sexuality* as something very specific, as a 'historically peculiar formulation, most strongly articulated a mere century back, where bio-medicine ascribed itself the authority to speak the 'truth' about sex and desire' (16).<sup>5</sup> He works out this meaning of sexuality, as predominantly referring to an aspect of personhood, as making a person into one or the other kind, homo or hetero, based on who he desires or fucks. This is sexuality understood as having an ontological dimension, as having something central to do with what one *is*, easily lending itself to formulations such as *I am....* akshay more than frequently encounters this meaning of sexuality in much of the literature he read for his thesis, and in many of situations he encounters in his 'field' (*ibid.*).

'It is in this context,' he writes, introducing his important neologism, 'that I use the term 'sexualness' to mark exactly its distinction from 'sexuality'' (15-16). By this he means something wider, a kind of eroticism that even as it is lived out in many specific idioms has crucially not staked a strong ontological claim like 'sexuality' has. In his experience of India, he says, of growing up there, and in his fieldwork and the chosen stories, 'the erotic and the sexual need not speak to the sense of self or the definition of the self at all – for instance, men have sex with other men, or are erotic with other men without thinking of themselves as any 'different'' (17). akshay is proposing a reading of several sexual situations as not always arranged under the major sign of the psychological-political sexual subjecthood, but as predominantly within

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<sup>5</sup> For more, see Weeks 1986, Katz 1990, khanna 2007 and chapter four in this thesis.

the complex debates around specific modern idioms of *Launda Naach* (boy dance), *Masti* (fun), *Meyeli Chhele* (girlish boy) or *Maitri-Karaar* (similar in form to marriage, among same sexes), among others, that relate to the debates on the political or psychological sexual subject, but are not wholly consumed by it. Sexuality becomes then, as it is in my own thesis, only one of the idioms among many, only one of the processes of modernity. ‘There is, in other words,’ he says, ‘a ‘sexualness’ that escapes the frame of sexuality – a sexualness that flows through subjects without constituting them’. This concept, he makes into the bedrock concept of his thesis, and uses it in exactly the same way as I use the more erratic and old phrase ‘desire’ in my own thesis, usually prefixed with ‘same-sex’ wherever situationally relevant. Desire as the erotic pull and push, as the tending towards some one or some body, as a feeling realized and lived out in such situations.

akshay’s larger proposed thesis then is simply this: that the process of entry into the juridical register, embarked on recently by the Indian activists, made them reaffirm a form of ‘sequestering, the naming of the Queer body in terms of identities referring to embodiments-in-the-world, as distinct ‘sexuality types’, i.e. ‘LGBT’ that could be presented to the State as a coherent and collective injured body in need of protection and acceptance by it (250). In pursuing this large ‘project of citizenship’, the activists and lawyers consciously framed ‘the question of sexualness as one of sexuality’, which akshay argues, following the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, was a ‘conscious misrecognition’ (*ibid.*). Responding in particular to the Althusserian scene of hailing, which akshay is also deeply interested in, Žižek writes that the ‘point is not just that we must unmask the structural mechanism which is producing the effect of subject as ideological misrecognition’ (1989: 2). In fact, ‘at the same time’, Žižek argues, ‘we



must...fully acknowledge this misrecognition as unavoidable – that is, we must accept a certain delusion as a condition of our historical activity, of assuming a role as agent of the historical process' (*ibid.*).

Sexuality – that has been bio-medically and psychoanalytically imagined as an aspect of the self, a history that akshay repeatedly alludes to and that I try to work out in chapter four of this thesis – works then as an anchor for the citizen-subject, as producing its subject effect in political situations, which sexualness did not do, or was not interested in doing. akshay tells the story of 'sexuality' as a kind of collateral payment that had to be paid by the activists in making their urgent bid to the State. Žižek frames it, and things like it, as unavoidable, a delusion that is the condition of our historical activity. What I want to propose is this: 'sexuality' indeed is an 'ideological misrecognition' but it is a misrecognition that, in all instances of its active life, is neither complete nor consistent. That we are not wholly or always taken in by the delusion – that we play a double game with it, believing it and disenchanting it 'at the same time' (I use this phrase denoting a double time, or more precisely, simultaneous temporalities, in the same way as Žižek has done as quoted above). And that if we are to speak of 'sexuality' as a full-bodied misrecognition, then we can speak only of those rare *sublime* moments that occur in the encounter with Law, that 'realm of grander [symbolic] legality' – that is, the legality of auratic documents and pronouncements, not of the law (without capital L) as experienced in day to day tussle in courts, and in strategizing outside it, not of the law of judges, lawyers and litigants as real-time human actors with diverse motivations – we can not speak of the ways in which 'sexuality' is lived out, in which it is bandied about in the media, used in thickly laden web-profiles, twisted in emotional narrations to the counsellor, used by anthropologists and authors

within the cover pages or dispersed within intimate personal narratives (khanna: 118). In fact the whole methodological trend of my thesis is from the topos of sublimity to the topos of the everyday. The latter offers not only a different site for the same concept of sexuality, but the revision of the concept itself. It offers those instances, where 'sexuality' begins to really behave like 'sexualness'. This trend also remains deeply acknowledged in akshay's thesis as I will remark shortly.

When I say sublime in relation to the encounter with Law and Epidemiology, I mean something very particular. Sublime as something grand, something in full-size, capable of inspiring awe. Sublime as something with an aura of importance, of being exemplary and at a distance, of being visibly set in stone, etched in gold. A judgment pronounced from the High Court bench in that moment of pronouncement, a State constitution as an iconic text, a religious scripture that commands a place of respect in a temple are all sublime in this sense. In contrast, everydayness resides in the minutiae, in the betrayal of awe, in the short-circuiting of any imposing distance and in emotional appropriation. It is mobilized by a far more functional and street-smart ability to use rather than be taken over by something, it is far more double in its orientation, half-deluded, half-sceptic. When a judgment circulates like Chinese whispers within multiple strands of Hindi and English media, or when it is heard by teary-eyed activists in the court room, when the State constitution is discussed thread-bare, torn apart and nitpicked with in feisty public consultations, or when the scripture is quoted, mis-quoted, parcelled into byte-sizes, then each of their respective sublimity dissipates.<sup>6</sup> The encounter of the 'sexuality' activists with Law, as akshay's thesis unmistakably evidences, happens on both these levels. It is made up of both

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<sup>6</sup> I want to thank Gautam Bhan for suggesting a version of this idea to me, for hammering it into my resistant head.

awe-some sublime moments and texts and also everyday confusions, disagreements, compromises and emotions. What I am suggesting is that 'sexuality' begins to look far more like 'sexualness', that is, specifically, it begins to work on the terms and in the ways of the latter, if we look at it through the lens of a non-sublime everydayness. The three major chapters, in this thesis, the one closely reading personal narratives included within activist anthologies, the one working out the many uses of the genre of 'lesbian and gay writing' and the one that works out the complexity of idioms of desire in the web-profiles on gay websites rather than taking at face value those filled up skeletal sign-up forms, that asks for the user's 'sexuality', do exactly this. These chapters try to find the conceptual meaning of sexuality that already takes into account its everyday functions. It is on that basis that I find sexual identity, and identity as such, as always being a double game, as always already leaving room for other idioms of same-sex desire, for other workings of sexualness 'at the same time', in the same breath.

akshay has taken this into account. His stories of the encounter with the Law and Epidemiology play out on both levels, that of sublimity and of everydayness. They are populated by the daily tussles and decisions, the frequent fights and conceptual disagreements of the many activists, NGO workers and others related with the 377 case. Often these stories themselves deal with 'quite other [political, economic] tensions', tensions not limited to the question of sexual desire, for instance, an extensively funded HIV-AIDS industry, other than triggering adoption of functional epidemiological categories, has also meant 'regular employment in NGOs, the creation of networks of support and services, and the inauguration of a realm of respectability for hitherto despised [queer] folk' (251, 41). His stories are of real-time actors, always finding themselves in the middle of both premeditated and unpremeditated actions. These are just so

many clusters of queer bodies and emotions that belie any simpleminded and underlining 'unity of these bodies' on any one count (251). akshay carefully elaborates, especially in his closing words on the 'cleavage on the queer body', and following French philosopher Deleuze's work on Foucault's essay 'The Order of Discourse', on the 'various lights, sources of light...sometimes these, and sometimes those' that illuminate, differently at different times, what we look at, what we choose to look at, when we look at sexuality, at sexualized bodies (253). In his long meditation on how what is *visible* – as body, as actions, as excess – both extends and interrupts what is *articulable* – as word, as pronouncement, as science – akshay is driven by the Deleuzian conceit about the excessive frontality of all visibility, only some of which we usually choose to see, only some of which we usually select for appreciation in real-time.<sup>7</sup>

He seems to be asking a series of connected questions that could be framed thus: what do you see, when you look at a homosexual? What are you ready to see, when you look at what you call a homosexual? What does the concept of the 'homosexual' make you see specifically in all that can be seen 'at the same time'? In short, what is so *remarkable* about the homosexual? To this series I add my question: having once seen a homosexual, are you prepared to see different kinds of homosexuals, are you prepared then to hold onto your horses, and not freeze the terms of what heterosexuality or homosexuality look like, are you ready, all of you, finally, as

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, as quoted in akshay khanna, reads 'Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer...if, in their turn, visibilities are never hidden, they are none the less not immediately seen or visible. They are even invisible as long as we consider only objects, things, or perceptible qualities, and not the conditions which open them up. And if these close-up again afterwards, visibilities become hazy or blurred to the point where 'self-evident' phenomena cannot be grasped by another age...a first light opens up things and brings forth visibilities as flashes and shimmering, which are the 'second light'...' (Deleuze; 1988: 45-9, quoted in khanna: 229, 241)

you already seem to be doing in practice, to then directly acknowledge the impossibility of any closure to the definition of the homosexual? With such a close caressing analysis of visibilities and words which want to grasp them, and with the examples of a male cop D.K. Panda who dresses like the mythological female lover of the divine Krishna, Radha, and becomes socially 'remarkable' on that count, and of a female super cop Kiran Bedi who dresses 'butch', akshay proposes what he calls a 'politics of ambiguity', something that I try to come close to in my elaboration of the field of the 'double game'.

What akshay proposes as an ideal politics, I propose as an implicit, even if usually unacknowledged state of affairs, a state whose potential we only see more of, the more we pore into it. akshay asks his readers, not for 'the replacement of the politics of identity' but instead to constantly see this politics in all its 'various lights', to always see its limits and thus go beyond them, thus be able to go beyond them (253). I want to further mobilize this main wish, to strengthen it by offering the proof of the everyday, which I argue, is ready to take up his demand. It already seems to work that way, it already has that potential which has to be mined more, talked about more. Identity is already ambiguous, is already double in its everyday messiness. Moments of unambiguity, of extreme clarity are the ones which are exceptional crises points, frequent but not consistent and never wholly determining. Even this last assertion of mine, is acknowledged in akshay's remarkable work but as something we always need to be alert to, something we need to consciously work towards. 'Simply put,' he says, 'if there is no identity, there is no ambiguity – if a given visibility had no possible referent in the articulable, or more precisely, it had no non-normative object to be seen as, it would simply pass as

unremarkable, maintaining a status-quo. In this sense, a politics of ambiguity is predicated upon a politics of identity...' (*ibid.*). In this sense, identity is a double game.

## (ii) Eleven Flashpoints: What Contemporary? Which Modern?

**The Neighbourhood Wayward:** 'अब से दसक साल पहले तक लोग आँख मारकर कहते थे, "इनके शौक ज़रा अलग .". 'नवाबी शौक', 'पटरी से उतरौ', 'राह से भटका मुसाफ़ि' जैसे जुमलों में तज़ था लेकिन तिरस्कार या घृणा की जगह एक तरह स्वीकार्यता भी :। हमारे स्कूल में बदनाम मास्टर थे, हमारी गल्लों में मट-मटकर चलने वाले 'आंटी ज' थे, भारत की राजनीति में कई बड़ी हस्तियाँ थीं जिन 'अलग तरह रंगीन-मिजा' के किस्से मशहूर थे लेकिन धार 377 का नाम अशोक राव कवि के अलावा ज्यादा लोग पता नहीं था' ('Around a decade or so back, people use to wink and say, 'their interests are a bit different', 'royal hobbies', 'gone a little off-track', 'lost one's path', such phrases had a brashness, but instead of insult or disgust, they also had a kind of acceptance in them. Our schools always had notorious teachers, our streets always had 'aunty ji's who use to walk campily, our Indian politics always had bigwigs whose colourful stories of a 'another kind of playfulness' were famous, but not many knew of the name of this Section 377 apart from [gay rights activist] Ashok Row Kavi')

- राजेश प्रिय, 'गे ग्लोबलाइजेशन का' ('The celebration of gay globalization'), BBC Hindi, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2009

**The Civil Society Homosexual:** 'This is one programme that has tirelessly advocated for decriminalizing homosexuality. In fact almost every year we convene our audience and panellists to make the case that no free society can treat what are choices between two consenting adults as some sort of crime.'

- Barkha Dutt, introducing NDTV show 'We the People' – 'Being Gay: the Parents' Story', 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2011

**The Bhojpuri Bard:** 'इ आज के डिमांड बा रउरा ना बुझाई/नर नर संगे, मादा मादा संगे जाई/हाई कोटे देले बाटे अइसन एगो फैसला/गे लो के मन बदल लेस्बियन के हौसला/भइया संगे मूछ वाली भउजी घ आई/इ आज के डिमांड बा रउरा ना बुझाई' ('O such are today's demands, you would not get it / Man goes with man, woman with woman goes / This High Court has given us such a decision / It encourages gay people, boosts lesbians' morale / Your brother now brings home a mustachioed sister-in-law / O such are today's demands, you would not get it')

- Manoj Bhawuk, Bhojpuri poem, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 2009, four days after the Delhi High court judgment decriminalizing adult consensual same-sex relations

**The Hindi-Porn Girl Next Door:** 'चलिए शुरू करते हैं जब से जबकि मेरी योवनावस्था शुरू हो हुयी । और मेरा पहला सेक्सुअल अनुभव हु , और नेचुरली यह लेस्बियन हो , क्योंकि अधिक के सेक्स अनुभव कि शुरुआत लेस्बियन अनुभवों से ही होती है, वैसे भी अधिकतर लड़कियों कि इतनी हिम्मत होती कि वो लड़के के साथ सेक्स करके अपने अनुभव कि शुरुआत क ...उसने मुझे मेरे कान के नीचे किस दि मेरे शरीर को अपनी ओर खीं । मैंने भी उसे किस कर दि । शुरू शुरू में सिफे लिप्स ही टच हो रहे थे पर र फ्रेंच किस शुरू हो गय , उसने मुझे अपनी बाहों में भर रखा था और हम दोनों स्तन एक दूसरे से रगड़ खा रहे थे। मेरे निप्पलस भी कड़े हो गए थे उन्हें छूने कि इच्छा त्रीव हो रही १ । हम दोनों के दिल की धड़कन आसानी से सुनी जा सक . मैं शर्मो भी रही थी और शर्म से लाल हुयी जा रही थी और किरण निभीकता से अपने काम में ४ ...' ('Come on, let's start from when my puberty set in. And when my first sexual experience happened, naturally this was lesbian, after all most of the girls' experience of sex begins with lesbian experiences, and anyway most girls do not have the courage that they go and begin their sex life by doing it with a boy...she kissed me under my ear and pulled my body towards her. I kissed her back. In the beginning only our lips were touching, but then soon, we started French kissing, she had held me in her arms and our breasts were rubbing against each others'. My nipples were hard now and my lust for touching them was increasing. Our heartbeats could be heard easily. Somehow I was shy as well, was going red with shyness but Kiran, she was boldly carrying on this fun...')

- 'Raj Sharma', 'जूही: एक लड़की के अनछुए सेक्सुअ -1' ('Juhi: The untouched sexual experiences of a girl') on the Hindi pornographic website *Fun-Mazza-Masti* ('fun-pleasure-play'), 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2010

**The Proud LGBT:** "'I am always reminded of my school days in the 1960s," said 57-year-old artist Sunil Gupta as he observed the marchers [of the Delhi Queer Pride] gather at Barakhamba Road. Gupta has attended all the three Delhi parades..."It seemed it would never happen in my lifetime. What's surprising is that the rate of change has accelerated. The first year there were fewer people wearing more masks, and today there are more people in fewer masks,"

- Aseem Chhabra, 'Gay, colourful and proud on Delhi's streets', on *rediff*, November 29, 2010

**The Licentious Sorts:** 'अरे तुझ जैसे रंडीबाज़ को कौन देता अपनी बेटी ...दोनों का चलन अच्छी समझ गए थे वो लोग...यारबाज़ अम्मी का रंडीबाज़ लौ ' ('O who would have given their daughter to a rake

like you in marriage...They had all too clearly understood the both of you...rakish son (*randibaaz*) of a whorish mother (*yaarbaaz*)

- Iftikhar (Naseeruddin Shah) to Babban (Arshad Warsi) in *Ishqiya* (Dir. Abhishek Chaubey), 2010

**The Patriarchal-Political Boy Fuckers:** 'ONLOOKER: *Don't you feel that you lose your Mardani ['masculinity'] when you have homosexual relationships?*

SK: Kya bakwaas karte ho, yaar [what rubbish are you speaking, my friend]! The only, genuine love is between two men. The love, of a man for a woman is selfish. The woman is always inferior and is willing to pretend all sorts of things in our society to get the man's attention. In our type of love there is tremendous sacrifice. I know that my boyfriends kept their watches girvi (mortgaged) to help me out when I was in trouble. Let a woman do that and I'll see the sun rising in the West.

ONLOOKER: *You talk of boys. How can you love so many at the same time?*

SK: Baccho, dil bada hona chahiye... [Listen, the heart should be big...]

- "Legalize homosexuality", interview with 'SK' who is 'the president of the *Laundebaaz-I-Hind* ['The Boy Fuckers of India'], India's first gay liberation front, recently formed in Bombay', in *Onlooker*, August 15-31, 1977

**The Medical Homosexual:** 'I first ask the patient if he wants to continue as a homosexual. If he says 'yes', then I tell him about the consequences like social pressure and stress, and I tell the parents that it's [homosexuality] not an illness, it's just an attraction. I also tell them that it doesn't exist in our diagnostic category. It has been removed from the DSM-IV [classification of mental disorders]; so homosexuality is not a 'diagnosis'. [But] if he doesn't want to continue with it [homosexuality], I tell him about my treatment. I personally don't treat it if it's not ego-dystonic, and because of family and societal pressure...'

- 38 yr old male psychiatrist in Pune, Maharashtra, interview with Ketaki Ranade, 2009

**The Offbeat Serious-Issue Lesbian:** 'प्रीति जिंटा हमेशा कुछ हट के काम करने विश्वास रख हैं। ऐसे में अगर उन्हें दूसरी महिला को चाहने वाला यानी कि लेस्बियन कारोल दे दिए जाए, तो? इस सवाल के जवाब में प्रीति अपने अंदाज में कहती हैं, 'ये तो स्क्रिप्ट पर डिपेंड करेगा। मुझे देखना पड़ेगा कि इस तरह किस्म को कहानी में कैसे पेश किया जा रहा है...ऐसे सब्जेक्ट पर मैं किसी ऐसी-वैसी फिल्म में काम नहीं करूंगी, जिसमें मुझे एक जोकर की तरह पेश किया जाएगा' ("Priety Zinta always wants to do something offbeat. Keeping this in mind, if she is given a role of a woman who likes other women i.e. of a lesbian, then? To this question, Preity replies in her own style, 'This depends on the script. I will have to see how this kind



of a character is being portrayed in the story...for this subject I will not work in any random film, in which I am being presented like a joker')

‘लेस्बियन रोल से परहेज नहीं प्रीति को’ (‘Preity will not avoid lesbian roles’), in *Navbharat Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2007

**The YouTube Buddies:** ‘[Video begins] In a small crammed VCD/DVD and electronic items shop, male friends in their mid twenties, seemingly working class salesmen, are having a bit of fun with their mobile camera when no customers are around. Friend kisses Naeem’s shirt, his collar, his neck, Naeem, slightly awkward, lets him, is irritated that another friend is taping all this nonsense.

Naeem [making a fist, pushing his friend away]: Teri ma ki choot [‘You motherfucker’]

Friend [hugging him, fondling him, being playfully crude]: thodi de na yaar, kabse... [unclear, they struggle a bit with each other] [‘give me some, buddy, since when...’]

Naeem gets into the game. Holds his friend tight in his arms, pushes him against the VCD stacks on the shop wall, and aggressively dry humps him as a way of getting back at him. The friend enjoys it and makes mock-yelping sounds. A third man pats Naeem’s moving butt, and the guy who is shooting all this on his mobile shouts ‘yeh do laundebaz’ (‘here are two boyfuckers’). Naeem, gives it a rest, laughs, says ‘bas’ (‘enough’), friend tries to kiss him again, he ducks. [Video ends]’

- ‘naeem londebaz: 2 loonde bazoon ki kahani un ki apni zubani’ (‘Naeem the boyfucker: The story of two boyfuckers in their own words’), labjab1234 channel, *YouTube*, accessed December, 2008

**The Legalistic Queers:** ‘We, as concerned citizens, members of the queer community, and other human rights activists, are deeply disturbed by TV9 Telugu channel’s 22nd Feb 2011 broadcast that violated the basic rights of the LGBTQI or queer community in India. Using private pictures [from a social sex networking website Planet Romeo], hidden-camera footage, and phone conversations, this broadcast made public the identities of some gay men without their consent. This was grossly invasive, unethical and violated the basic regulations of the National Broadcasting Association. Furthermore, News9, the TV9 English news channel in Bangalore, has continued to telecast a slightly edited version even after numerous protests against this news story.’

- ‘Public protest against homophobic TV9 reports’, Press Release, Indian Women Press Corps, New Delhi, 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2011

Contemporary India can be story-boarded in many ways. The most comprehensive will be the story in which each of these eleven flash points can be accounted for. In which they can all be interrelated and be told as part of the same story. In which the terms of their contemporaneity

- of each one of them - can be fully worked out. This would be best when it is done without taking recourse to simple chronological games whereby some of them are seen only as remnants of an 'unmodern' past and others as flagships of a 'modern' present. The story, instead, has to be of one deeply fraught modern in which each of them play a role, in which each of them cue the other, in which all of them are relentlessly contemporary and bear witness to a complicated modernity.

At the outset, I would like to establish how I use the concept of modernity. It seems to me that literature that discusses this concept acknowledges its two distinct directions, its two predominant senses. I call them the *distinguishing function* of modernity and its *chronological function*. The former establishes the trope of modernity *primarily* to mark out differences of particular worldviews from other worldviews. The otherness here is often skimmingly established by either a distance between times, or a distance between regions, frequently giving us problematic visions of timelocked lands and landlocked times. In more rigorous and interesting works, however, this distinguishing function of modernity is established more fundamentally with the distance between ideas, between cognitions, between people's ways of looking at the things around them and making sense of them.

Delhi based writer Ravi Sundaram, for instance, in his *Pirate Modernity* chiefly makes media and communications into the main distinguishing function in his reading of modernity (2010: 1-27). Looking at late twentieth century Delhi, he zones in on an urban mis-en-scene that is populated by screens, phones and wires, on the cheap, pirated production of all sorts of electronic gadgetry that unequivocally mediates the complex relations between people and between the people and the State. Pirate modernity, for him, is *after media*. For him, media is the most

interesting and the most influential sign of his field, of the time and region he specifically looks at. The wedge that the idea of modernity draws then, here, is actually the wedge between the presence and absence of this kind of media. In terms of the distinguishing function, then, his particular version of the modern and the non-modern are mainly related to the presence or absence of this sort of dispersal of media, whatever be the time or region.

Another example of the distinguishing function of modernity is French philosopher Michel Foucault's *The Will to Knowledge* (1978). In it, his now famous formula that the 'sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species' rests on the distinguishing function that had been cited in the title itself: that passionate, almost fanatical will to knowledge residing in 'modern' institutions of government, medicine and religion (43). The figure of the 'homosexual' got precipitated within such institutions that mobilized and embodied this will to knowledge. The Christian confession, its recoding as therapeutic within late 19<sup>th</sup> century European psychoanalysis, the massive output of the Anglo-American family of sexologists of the same time, all this and more contributed to 'the nineteenth century homosexual', now not only a juridical subject of some forbidden acts, but instead, 'a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood...a type of life, a life-form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology' (*ibid.*).<sup>8</sup> Foucault could be read, in

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault cites the Berlin based psychiatrist and neurologist Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal's (d. 1890) article 'Archiv fur Neurologie', published in 1870, as a kind of first iconic moment for the idea of the homosexual. 'We must not forget,' he writes, 'that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth – less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it

this instance, to place the idea of modernity in the absence or presence of those institutions that embody that will to knowledge, that 'incite discourse', that practically want to know, count, recognize and abstract out a person from her specific sexual relations. Those institutions – whether the government census, the clinic or the counsellor's couch among others – are the ones that can be said to distinguish the 'modern' from the 'non-modern', whatever time or place.

The chronological function of modernity has a slightly different sense, one which is often invoked wherever the word 'modern' appears. This sense is present as much in the way the concept of 'modernity' circulates in much intellectually rigorous non-fiction (even if it is lurking) as it is in those millions of casual syndications it finds in the media while it travels around us and infuses our worlds. In short, whereas the distinguishing function establishes modernity through *whatever is different*, in whichever time or place, the chronological function establishes it through *whatever is present in the later moment*. I read this not as whatever comes afterwards, to the simple exclusion of the earlier, but instead, whatever remains present in that afterward, whatever has palpable effect in that afterward. This function indeed uses the terms of time, but it is not time-bound, that is, it is not simplistic or linear, because what it posits is an always radically mixed present.

Theoretically, this is very interesting and deeply political. In any given moment, all that you can observe around you, all that you can feel the effects of, has to be accounted for in that moment,

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was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul' (1978: 43).

each of those things have to be mapped out in relations of power to each other.<sup>9</sup> Things cannot conveniently be seen as belonging to *another time*. They have to be dealt with as effects of the present. Whether it is feudal or democratic politics, middle-class or tribal ways of living, equal or toppled gender relations, secular or religious belief systems, progressive or reactionary worldviews, or conflicting ideas of what constitutes the social norm, an ideal person, or a stable personality – within this particular function of modernity, each of these have to be acknowledged together, as copresent, as coexisting, as making up the ‘modern’. Each of these, as seen in any given moment, are the effects of and transformed by the modern. In simple terms, each of these is radically contemporary, where even perceived anachronism of some over the others is a relation of power. In this thesis, I mobilize both these functions of the concept of modernity, the distinguishing and the chronological, each becoming evident as I go along. Finally I hope to have established the relations between all the copresent idioms of same-sex desire, particularly as seen in the last twenty to thirty years in India. These could be relations of perceived ascendancy of some over the others, relations of irony, relations of language, of imminent demise, of persistence, of differentiation among the classes, of official recognition by the State, and then of course, place these relations in an always eclectic and structurally careful-careless use of idioms in the everyday.

But of what particular contemporary do I speak? The ‘contemporary’ resides in eclectic places and cannot be read without an eclecticism of method. It cannot be read only in the sublime

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<sup>9</sup> American queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ‘Axiom 5’ in her *The Epistemology of the Closet* was precisely about the mixed nature of that ‘Great Paradigm Shift’, from the ‘sodomite’ to the ‘homosexual’ for instance, in which, she argued, there is no simple ‘supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead...[there are] relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models *during the times that they do coexist*’ (1990: 44, 47, emphasis mine).

documents of the nation State, or in the legalism of its judiciary. By corollary, it also cannot be read only in the civil society groups which plead to this State on various counts, by using the language which it understands and responds to - legal petitions, press-releases, signature campaigns and mediatized public demonstrations. The story of the contemporary must necessarily talk about them but then exceed these accounts. In fact it is in this 'excess' that the many idioms of same-sex desire lie - idioms which have an odd relation with the legal State. Idioms which often spoil the good progressive story around the 'homosexual' that is tending to become common-sensical within sections of the national media and is making some headway within the medical and psychiatric establishments. Idioms which can be read only when we labour between disciplines.

The vernacular, the paralegal, and the everyday in the story of this fraught modern are more and more inseparable from the metropolitan, the legal and the sublime. These two sets scarcely work as antonyms but keep on transforming each other – sometimes work *as* each other, in each others' names. This is easily evidenced. When the young Delhi based writer Rana Dasgupta tried to take stock of the post-1990 years of economic liberalization in India and what it had done to Delhi, he found a peculiar city at hand. A city in which the 'urban' could not be understood in simple 'liberal' or 'progressive' terms. A city that was embedded in rapid and opaque economic changes at the turn of the twenty-first century that were 'far too explosive for the tiny English-speaking class to monopolize its rewards' (2010).

The offshoots of the 'former English-speaking colonial elite' - here Dasgupta is thinking of those who pass out of India's premier universities, a section of its bureaucracy, those now in salaried jobs in international banks and consultancies, or those in the privileged sections of the

academia, judiciary and media, those whose upper arc populate elite clubs like the India International Centre and other 'sophisticated' spaces of talks and panels, those who consume 'culture' in its polished, curated versions - this class of people, he contends, were not the 'primary beneficiaries' of the economic changes underway. This class which had for long easily dabbled in the prescribed vocabulary of 'democracy', 'liberalism' and 'citizenship' now found itself hesitantly conceding some of its effective power, spaces and key terms to players who were not cast in its mirror image. To those who used a language dissimilar to their own in order to inhabit the very same city.

The city was coming to be dominated, Dasgupta suggests, by a group that had to be analyzed differently because it came with a different ethics, a cruder aesthetics and a more illicit version of post-liberalization commerce. This was the 'new rich' that wielded power 'in vernacular terms' (*ibid.*). This could be seen as 'Delhi's dominant economic group', driven by inherited land and corruption – those factors on which the 'implausible escalations' of post-liberalization commerce rode (*ibid.*). It came from adjoining towns and provinces and had its hands in black-money and local government contracts. This was the big pool of private businessmen, migrant entrepreneurs, real-estate agents, retailers, builders and general wheeler-dealers that surrounded the little islands of those with their foreign degrees, cosmopolitan habits, fluency in English and liberal-progressive veneers. It began to occupy the same entertainment, education and public spaces as them and transforming them. It began to affect the reigning tone of the city by becoming immanent in it. It found itself at ease with popular, recent innovations in television and print media, including growing use of Hindi in hitherto exclusively English channels like MTV and Channel V, a Bollywoodization of elite 'trance' discotheques, a media-

mediated middle-class turn for a well-marketed 'traditional' in a swelling number of observed festivals and 24/7 broadcasts of a Hindu-heavy spiritualism and of astrology *as* news. This group – that made it difficult and pointless to determine any longer the exact contours of an urban 'upper class' or even the 'middle-class' – was not necessarily university educated and had climbed more informal ladders of commercial apprenticeship. This pool came full with religious consumerism, brash discounting of democratic protocol and the confidence of being politically connected and culturally embedded.

Dasgupta's story sometimes reads like that of a city under siege but at its careful moments, it is more about incompatible concepts and imaginations adjusting to each other, an adjustment that is unprecedented in its scale, and even in its clumsiness. More precisely, this is a sort of adjustment whereby the distinction between the 'modern' and the 'unmodern', the sophisticated urban and the crude provincial and the progressive and the reactionary is increasingly untenable if you have to make an adequate analysis of the situation at hand.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This adjustment is already palpable enough to trigger popular representation. A recognizably new wave in Bombay cinema, mobilized by young writers and directors from outside the established film families and production houses, has already begun to respond to this post-liberalization moment of adjustment. Films like *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye* (Dir. Dibakar Banerjee: 2008), *Love, Sex aur Dhokha* (*ibid*: 2010) and *Dev D* (Dir. Anurag Kashyap: 2009), among others, work with new aesthetics, plot-lines, language, cinematography and characterization. The protagonists speak the confident pidgin that is formed at the cusp of a largely non-English medium education in the small-towns and the preponderance of a seductive English media in the city. The shooting locations are not foreign cities and landscapes, instead, the camera enters the messiness of the Indian urban, sketching its newly visible wealth of luxury showrooms and malls, its diluted versions in local supermarkets for the burgeoning middle classes, its old-cities and extensive pirate markets, its highways and gullies, and its lit surfaces and *noir* backwaters. The protagonists themselves have been made possible at the turn of the century. They use cheaper, pirated electronics, fly in a more affordable aviation sector, work, love and pray in situations pervaded by video and telecom technology and watch scandalous exposes and reality shows on television. They work around formal State and market systems with an informal, even illegal flair. They mark a confident vernacular that is working the city



Economic liberalization could not simply be narrated as a transparent rise of pure 'democratic', 'liberal' concepts. This is how it is usually framed in the formal accounts of the Indian State, the sort found on ministry websites, and of sizable sections of the Indian national media and civil society. This conceptual purity is unfounded. Dasgupta's narrative rereads this 'rise' as impure, as far more interrupted, as more maze-like. His story is not about the progressive shedding of the 'unmodern', not the simple fading of graft, not the leaving behind of the vernacular or the religious in favour of an anglicized cosmopolitan and the secular. It is instead about the return of the vernacular, more precisely, the return of *the vernacular as the urban*, as the reigning feeling of the city. This 'return' is in the sense of the reinvigorated presence of the vernacular in urban news and entertainment media and in its knotty politics. The vernacular which in this modern moment of reinvention – over and above Dasgupta's story of the 'new rich' – is increasingly recognized for its long-term mass value, for its broad commercial possibilities for the growing service sector and for its hold over 'the people's imagination'.

This kind of a return is intensified and is possible *only within the modern*, matched to its current economic and political movement. Modern media networks mobilize the vernacular into newer and endlessly redistributable circuits. This rejuvenated vernacular – multiplied by the feverish media channels and publications – is mainly an outcome of last two decades. The 9<sup>th</sup> flashpoint, in which an exploding Hindi media takes on 'offbeat' ('कुछ हट के') issues of 'lesbian' film roles,

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on its terms. In *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye*, remarking on a section of the Delhi rich, super crook Lucky's buddy tells him: 'बस ज़रा इन गेन्ट्री वाले लोगों से बच के रहियो, बोलते इंग्लिश हैं ये, करते देसी हैं भाड़े' ('Just remain careful of these gentry types pal, they speak English but do it country-style' or as the film subtitles put it, 'just watch out with this swish set, they speak posh but play dirty').

is part of a post-liberalization universe. A universe in which vernacular television and print media, which has continued to consolidate its top readership and viewership numbers over its English counterparts, confidently and uniquely tackles 'progressive' issues of 'sexuality', transforming them in the process. The 'sensitivity' pitch for the 'serious issue of homosexuality' sits right next to the hints of play and sensation that are regular in popular racy broadcasts and lurid Page 3 gossip. Dasgupta's story - which is sometimes weakly framed as a scandal wreaked upon the English types by slightly threateningly framed, provincial, Hindi-Punjabi types - is only one of the many current stories in which the eleven flash points can be plotted. His story can be made more nuanced. Its characterization can be given depth. The besieged elite can be framed in less absolving and less pathetic terms. And Dasgupta's view of the vernacular can be reframed to be less glaring, more expansive, sometimes even benign, exciting and full of possibilities. But its central argument - that the present moment is not subject to any smooth progress of liberal ideas but is riddled by many criss-crossing influences - has to be taken up and deepened in our own story. An information-heavy modernity, by its very nature, can only criss-cross ideas, never able to put them in one gear.

For the eleven flashpoints of same-sex desire to be fully placed in the story of contemporary India we need to take into account a third group, one that is an absent presence in Dasgupta's story. This group also makes up a mass vernacular but one that is usually more intricate and always more stressed than the vernacular of Dasgupta's 'new rich' in the contemporary urban. This group, which comprises of slum-dwellers, squatters, low paid irregular workers in urban markets, domestic servants and migrant skilled and semi-skilled labourers, is a large chunk of the city. It has an odd relation with the governing State and is also embedded within the media

networks of the city. Ravi Sundaram's *Pirate Modernity* sees this group as living in those moments where the official legal and civic structures of the city are disrupted by large mass-based pirate economies – by siphoning off electricity, by squatting in unauthorized colonies, by cultivating local political favours, by consuming cheap imported electronics, assembling them, and by pirating sources of entertainment and television connections.

The YouTube buddies – in the 10<sup>th</sup> flash point above, playing with each other and calling each other *laundebaaz* in what is most likely a shop of pirated CDs and electronic items – are more a part of this grey zone by which 'subaltern populations, out of place in the contemporary city' get to inhabit it, get to find place in it (Sundaram: 12). The liberal civil society seems to be at odds with this urban poor often posing them as the 'problem of the city', as variables to be disciplined in the legal plans of the city (22). The affluent Resident Welfare Associations, the transparency campaigners, local city courts, bodies of 'experts' on different issues and media managers, armed with new technologies of TV campaigns, bio-identification, figures on air and river pollution, among others, try to control this bulky poor population but not without resistance. They move them around *en masse* according to their expedient models of an ideal city; '[t]o date the court-supervised expert committees have removed more than 200,000 people from their old habitats' (22-3). There is an ongoing clash between what can be called the pirate version of the modern and the official civic liberal version – both effects of a now heavily mediatized world – and this clash in primarily of ways of thinking about the city and functioning in it. A clash in which each imagines and inhabits the urban differently, even incompatibly. This clash is not at all immaterial to our study. It theorizes the mixed nature of the contemporary in urban India. It tells us that the contemporary, being home to clashes, has not decided among all

its options. It is in the *not yet* of this decision that all of our eleven flashpoints survive and interact.

In terms of the different idioms of same-sex desire, some of the most crucial meeting points where the unlike concepts begin to merge, or let's say, the meeting points between the 10<sup>th</sup> flashpoint (of the 'laundebaaz' of vernacular humour) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> flashpoint (of liberal 'decriminalization' and 'LGBT' rights of an English media program) are the almost twenty year old anti-AIDS NGOs that have dotted the Indian cities and small towns. They become some of the most interesting points of experiment between social idioms and classes – important not only in their work hours but also for the after-work sense of community that forms among its members and volunteers. Here individuals from the lower-middle classes, including Hijra communities, have come to add to and own the language of 'rights', 'sexuality' and 'transsexuality' in the vernacular and, sometimes, in a slightly bureaucratized English. Writing about the emergence of the HIV-AIDS industry in the last two decades in India, akshay khanna writes that this industry 'is primarily involved in establishing ways in which...socio-economically marginalised bodies are made available for intervention, research, and clinical trials for drugs and vaccines' (khanna; 2010: 45). 'This process of establishing relations of availability,' however, 'has simultaneously engendered social mobility for Queer folk who are otherwise excluded from masculinist political economies' (*ibid.*).

The 'field' of work of these NGO employees – condom distribution in cruising parks, spreading sexual health awareness among 'Men who have Sex with Men' (MSM) – till very recently,

exceeded the boundaries of the legal and its terms and conditions.<sup>11</sup> This public health focus has imagined the population as divided into distinct 'high-risk' groups in need of targeted interventions, whether MSMs, CSWs (Commercial Sex Workers) or IDUs (Injecting Drug Users) as culled out from the 'general population' which it is thought to endanger. This stress on formalizing categories, and of filing people within those categories as evidence of intervention work and rationale for continued funding has remained at best ambivalent, with each of these categories behaving differently inside and outside of official NGO registers.<sup>12</sup> When the annual

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<sup>11</sup> This contradiction was the basis for the filing of the PIL against section 377 in the Delhi High Court to facilitate targeted interventions with the MSMs without any police hassle. For more on the history of the two petitions against section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in the Delhi High Court, see khanna, akshay, 2010, 'The Social Lives of 377 - Constitution of the Law by the Queer Movement' in *A Refracted Subject: Sexualness in the Realms of Law and Epidemiology*, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, pg. 118-142.

<sup>12</sup> Within the HIV-AIDS industry's 'development' discourse around sexual health, the categories of 'kothi' (the effeminate male who is penetrated), 'panthi' (the masculine partner who penetrates), the 'double-dekker' or 'do-parantha' (one who both penetrates and is penetrated) or of 'MSM' ('Men who have sex with men') are some of the targeted answers to the incredibly complex social situation in India in which much sexual relations between men are carried out but without categories akin to 'homosexual' or 'gay' that could have facilitated specified sexual health interventions directed at a specific 'community', like in the U.S.A. in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In response, with its massive focus on keeping records for donor bodies and of formalizing specific groups that need to be intervened upon, this strand of public health organizing and 'development' work began culling the vernacular idioms of same-sex desire, building on them, re-framing and solidifying them, even exaggerating and adding to them to make them into tenable categories that could be understood by the government and private funding bodies. This formalization however is never complete, or without its share of double play. Neither is it insulated from the language of 'gay rights' popular within the media and other 'sexuality' based groups. After a few visits to the Milan Centre in Delhi, run by the Naz Foundation, an NGO working on HIV-AIDS and sexual health, I realized that there is a diversity of terms and concepts at work here to understand same-sex relations and to live out male effeminacy. Community workers understood the pliability of identities like 'kothi' and 'panthi', even as they might have penned them down with bureaucratic rigidity in their registers. At other times, they used words like 'kothi' and 'gay' seamlessly and unselfconsciously, suggesting an unprecedented confluence of their meanings and uses. Neither was the penetrator/penetrated (panthi/kothi) model very rigidly set. In mid-2009, when I

Pride marches in Delhi – flagged in the 5<sup>th</sup> flash point – are noticeably attended both by the English-speaking middle and upper classes and by those groups that have come to consolidate around HIV-AIDS NGOs and speak a mixed, confident vernacular, then these events of ‘Pride’ become strong visual markers of the clumsy proximity of classes. And thus also of the nearness of the many idioms of same-sex desire in contemporary India. The three Delhi Queer Pride marches (2008-10), not unlike their recent counterparts in other Indian cities, have been fairly assorted both in their demography and their language and content of sloganeering.<sup>13</sup> These

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attended one of the group meetings in the office of the Humsafar Trust, also a group working on HIV-AIDS and sexual health, in Vakola, Bombay, one community worker told all of us that, on his rounds of the ‘field’, he gives information both on ‘active’ penetration and ‘passive’ reception to *all* people involved because he can never fathom when they might ‘switch,’ ‘kab palti maar lein’. In contemporary India, these offices of AIDS-based NGOs become exciting and unpredictable points where different idioms of same-sex desire come to experiment with each other. For more on this, see Cohen, Lawrence ‘The Kothi Wars: AIDS Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification’ in Vincanne Adams, Stacy Leigh Pigg (ed.) *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective*, Duke University Press, 2005: pg. 269-304, and, khanna, akshay ‘Taming of the Shrewd *Meyeli Chhele*: A political economy of development’s sexual subject’, in *Development*, 2009: 52, pg. 43–51, and of course, khanna, akshay, 2010, ‘The Soft Boy and heris Hard (Epidemiological) Fact’ in *A Refracted Subject: Sexualness in the Realms of Law and Epidemiology*, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, pg. 45-84.

<sup>13</sup> A text cloud of slogans on banners used during the three years of the Delhi Queer Pride would include: ‘Greedy Bisexual’, ‘Happy Homo’, ‘Delhi Be Proud’, ‘Proud Indian Lesbian’, ‘Love knows no Gender’, ‘Yes to Gay Rights’, ‘Dilli Ko Satrangi Salaam [A Rainbow Salute to Delhi]’, ‘Proud to be Bisexual’, ‘Stop Oppression of Transgenders’, ‘Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai, Hetero-Homo Bhai Bhai [Like Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs & Christians, Heteros, Homos are Brothers]’, ‘Keep your laws off my body’, ‘Queer Dilli Meri Jaan [Queer Delhi My Life]’, ‘Ham Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke, Hamse Kuch Na Boliye [We Are Travellers On The Path Of Love, Don’t Tell Us Anything]’, ‘Give Me Support, I Want To Take Off My Mask’, ‘Gay ≠ Freak’, ‘Straight But Not Narrow’, ‘Pyaar To Pyaar Hota Hai [Love is Love After All]’, ‘No Need For Homophobia, Lesbian Suicides, Forced Marriages’, ‘Ham Dilli Ke Dilwale [We the Hearty of Delhi]’, ‘Born Gay, Follow the Ray, Born Straight, Refuse to Hate’, ‘My Hero is Homo’, ‘Boys will Be With Boys’, ‘Out Is In’, ‘Out Of The Closet And Into The Streets’, ‘I Am Proud To Say My Grandson Is Gay’, ‘Drop 377’, ‘Loving Isn’t A Crime’, ‘Don’t Criminalize Love’, ‘Gay by Nature, Proud by Choice’, ‘Delhi Queer’, ‘Gay and Proud of it’, ‘Queer and Loving it’. The

events bring together various contemporary registers – ways of speaking and doing things – that have made space for representing and living out same-sex relations in India. They form wild, visual clusters of memes and bodies, all mixing with odd results.

In the year 2007, when AIDS activists and NGO coordinators Aditya Bondyopadhyay and Vidya Shah were putting together ‘stories of violence and tales of hope’ of the ‘Kothi community in India’, for their organization Naz Foundation International’s coffee-table publication, they performed this very habitual merger of frames. ‘When 18 years old Gunaseelam [from Tamil Nadu, and most probably lower middle class] decided to come out as a Kothi,’ they wrote, ‘his family and friends made him an object of ridicule. Calling him names such as ‘Vadi’ and ‘Podi’ (slang in Tamil for come and go for women). His parents noticed this and began abusing him and ill-treated him, to the extent of poisoning his food. Gunaseelam was scared, angry and decided to seek support from an MSM network’ (2007: 36). Here, *kothi*, a fairly new term that found life and circumstantial use (and imagined histories) mainly within the context of the two-

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first Delhi Queer Pride, June 29th 2008 was simultaneously translated, spoken about and publicized as *Dilli Samlaingik aur Transgender Garv Utsav*. *Garv* implies pride. *Samlaingik* comes from the Sanskrit prefix *sam-* implying same (homo- is the combining form of Greek for ‘same’) and *laingik* is a derivation from Hindi *ling*. Here *ling* is used to denote the gender of the person, male or female; it works as a part of the Hindi grammar system, *stri-ling* (female gender), *pu-ling* (male gender) and *napunsak-ling* (closest in sense to neuter, but outside grammar, also a term of invective for those who are effeminate or for Hijras). *Samlaingik* was an attempt of liberal activists and sexual health NGOs since mid-late 90s to create the Hindi equivalent of the term ‘homosexual’. It is now very common in popular Hindi print and visual media. In the same vein, Delhi-based non-profit organization working on women’s sexual and reproductive rights – Sangini (India) trust simultaneously produced its *Guide To Your Rights: Legal Handbook For Sexual Minorities In India* as *Hakon Ki Aur: Bharat Ke Yaunik Alapmaton Ke Liye Kanuni Sahayata Pustika* (2005).

decade old HIV-AIDS NGOs is used breathlessly with the idea of 'coming-out' that is a direct loan-word from liberal-confessional framework 'gay' and 'lesbian' identity politics.<sup>14</sup>

Bondyopadhyay and Shah state that Kothis are 'feminized males' who do 'male-to-male sex', they are 'very much a subculture in South Asia' and their 'exclusion from the mainstream' is 'deepened due to their 'different' gender identity and sexual behavior' (17). How do you then *come out* as a Kothi? How do you *come out* as an effeminised male, a condition constituted precisely by an apriori visibility, something possible due to the gendered social attitudes about how bodies should look and behave visually? Is *kothi* starting to work here like sexual identity, something that can be hidden and revealed, *closeted* and *outed*, something that is thought to be a factor of the self, its permanent aspect constant through secrecy or disclosure? Bandyopadhyay and Shah were less concerned with conceptual rigour. They were describing Gunaseelam's self-identification as *kothi* to mark a clear break in his life's narrative, a turning-point, akin to that popular conceit of breakage in 'coming out', the iconic watershed moment milked in much 'gay' and 'lesbian' literature and liberal politics. Here, in an NGO publication, different contemporary registers mix and cast situations and people in their own messy images. This proximity of idioms, this nearness of registers, it is easy to argue, has a veritable historical legacy in India.

In the November of 1946, summoned for the second hearing by the courts of the colonial State on the charges of obscenity for her Urdu short-story *Lihaf* ('The Quilt'), the writer Ismat Chughtai reaches Lahore. It had been about four years since *Lihaf* had been published in the Urdu journal *Adab-e-Lateef*. It told the story of Begum Jan who is married into a rich Muslim

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the history and use of the term 'kothi', see Cohen: 2005; khanna: 2010; Reddy: 2005.



household where she begins to find pleasure in her housemaid Rabbu's service - in her massages, in her recipes, in her touch. Narrated in the voice of an un-omniscient young girl, the story ends with a moment of radical speculation - what the young girl hears at night from the Begum's bed, what she makes of Rabbu's palpable presence there, what she sees under the Begum's quilt. None of this is directly revealed in the story but instead, breathed into its air, nourishing a text with exciting inferences. Yet 'Lihaf', now charged in court, was already a subject of some scandal and concern in Chughtai's literary circles. She found herself explaining her motivations for writing the story to one older writer M. Aslam in Lahore. This motivation was propelled by a peculiar sort of confusion. In fact, the confusion is key to this matter, to her writing the story:

'अस्ल में असलम , मुझे कभी किसी ने नहीं बताया कि 'लिह ' वाले मौजू पर लिखना गुनाह है। न मैंने किसी किताब में पढ़ा कि ...मर ...या लत के बारे में लिखना नहीं चाहिए शायद मेरा दिमाग अब्दुररहमान चुगताई का ब्रश , एक सस्ते-सा कैमरा है; जो कुछ देखता है, खट से बटन दब जाता है और मेरा कलम मेरे हाथ में बेबस होता है' ('Actually Aslam Sahab, I was never told by anyone that I should not write on this particular subject of 'Lihaf'. Neither did I read in any book that one should not write about this...illness [*marz*]...or...addiction [*lat*]. Maybe my mind is not the brush of Abdurrahman Chughtai, it is instead a cheap sort of camera, whatever it sees, it clicks, and my pen becomes helpless in my hand.'

(Chughtai; 1998: 32-3)

The ellipses are Chughtai's own, foregrounding the element of confusion - foregrounding the centrality of the confusion to what she is saying. The citation is from her memoir. In the middle of 1940s, Chughtai is not able to choose a single frame for same-sex desire, for the erotic relationships between women. What she does is more interesting for us. It launches the analytic of the mixed contemporary, of a contemporary that is unable to reconcile its formal and informal dimensions, its medical ideas and social attitudes, its university curricula and its

everyday habits. This inability to reconcile is also a form of indifference to any urgency to reconcile.

Instead, Chughtai's strategy, in her own words, is photographic. It clicks the picture, keeping all its meanings frontally available, always in a confusing proximity. She uses more than one frame, in the same - slightly halting - breath, to talk of 'this particular subject of 'Lihaf''. One is *marz* or illness, capable of being medically framed. It is soluble with ideas of 'homosexuality' partially formalized as a disease. It is understood as a 'condition' within 20th century European and colonial discourses of institutional medicine and psychiatry; in fact later in her defense with M. Aslam, Chughtai specifically refers to contemporary 'नफ़ासेयात और डॉक्टर' ('psychology and medical curricula').<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> When charged with a lack of proper religious education by M. Aslam, Chughtai gives him a short trajectory of her successive encounters with knowledge about this 'subject of *Lihaf*'. It is here that she cites a strong formal medical tradition accessible to her at the university libraries in late colonial India: 'जब बचपन में मैंने ज्यादा किताबें पढ़ीं तो मेरे दिल को धक्का सा लगा। वो बातें गंदी लगतीं। फिर मैंने बी.ए. के बाद पढ़ा तो पता चला कि वो बातें गंदी नहीं, बड़ी समझ-बूझ कि बातें हैं जो हर जी-होश इंसान को मालूम होनी चाहिए। वैसे लोग चाहें तो नफ़ासेयात और डॉक्टरों के कोसे में जो किताबें हैं उन्हें भी गंदा कह दें' ('When I read more books about this then I was shocked. These things seemed dirty. But when I read about it after my B.A. then I came to know that these things are not obscene, they are infact quite insightful and should be known by every reflective person. As it is, if people want they could call even those books on psychology and those in the doctors' medical curricula obscene') (Chughtai; 1998: 33). During these B.A. days at the missionary institution Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, Ismat Chughtai had at her disposal a library full of literary and scientific texts from Europe and India. 'आई.टी. कॉलेज में कई हजारों किताबें थीं' ('I.T. College had thousands of books') (*ibid.* 251). It is here that her head began to swirl with the clash of different and contradictory systems of knowledge, including her confusion over how to reconcile the Darwinian theory of evolution with the Islamic-Christian theory of the divine genesis - 'दिमाग कलाबाज़ियाँ खाने लगा' ('My head began to do acrobatics') (*ibid.* 256). Later working as a school-teacher in Bareilly, Chughtai continues her

When the young psychiatrist from Pune – in the 8<sup>th</sup> flash point above – talks about the removal of 'egosyntonic homosexuality' from the list of 'diagnostic categories', he is adding a recent chapter to this long-standing 'scientific' tradition. Chughtai's other frame, *lat*, is that of excessive habit, a sort of addiction that is not yet medicalized. It is more squarely part of another long-standing Urdu social tradition of *shauk* or one's personal inclinations. It is understood as being within an excessive but always familiar bandwidth of habits. *Lat* as that thing which one is given to, which is always of various kinds - for food, for games, for music, for prostitutes, for girls, for boys, for getting into arguments - and comes in less and more ordinary versions. Chughtai does not reconcile these two frames. She persists with both. She confuses both. This confusion, this doubleness of understanding, has evidently persisted into the more recent contemporary.

When we study in terms of 'idioms' we can immediately mark the presence of something new when it happens. This is most evident in the gradual and spontaneous appearance of

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ravenous and eclectic reading. She tells one friend about reading a lot of Freud, where she would have inevitably picked up on references to 'homosexuality'. True to her doubleness of understanding, her reading of Freud was never blindly trusting but always critical and looking for loopholes and incompatibilities, even subjecting Freud's name to a cheeky and hilarious pun. Talking of her experience of reading Freud, she states '...मुकम्मल इमान ला स । कुछ फ्रॉइड भी है फ्रायड में। एक कज है मेरे ज़ेहन में । कितना भी अज़ीम इंटेलेक्चुअल , मैं आँख मूँदकर इमान लाने कि कायल नहीं। न जाने क्या आदतें-बद हैं कि सबसे पहले उनके कौल में लूपहोल तलाश ँ हैं। मुवाफ़िकत से पहली सारी मुखालिफ़त कि -रेख कर लेनी चाहि ...पहला लफ मेरी जुबां से शायद 'क्यू' हि निकला होगा, हालाँकि इस क्यो ने मुझे बड़ी मार खिलाई है' ('I could not bring complete faith to it. There is some fraud in Freud. My mind always has a nagging doubt. No matter how great an intellectual it is, I am never fond of giving blind trust. I don't know what sort of habit it is that first I always search for loopholes in their work. Before suitability we should always take stock of all the incompatibilities...may be the first word my mouth ever uttered was 'why', although this 'why' has landed me in a lot of trouble') (ibid. 205).

neologisms. Idioms are as resistant to each other as they are inviting. They have a habit of adjusting to each other, of coming near and grafting their meanings onto the other. What in Chughtai's story are ellipses, expressing both confusion and nearness, can become more comfortable word formations that hold together different meanings – that recruit the histories of different terms into a new one that cannot any longer be folded back into either of its precedents. They become words that are best understood as double gestures. To close this section, I outline just one of them.

*Sajan chale sasural* ('Hubby visits the in-laws') is an online Hindi pornographic story made possible in this last decade – firstly, with the deepening of access to the internet in the growing number of cyber-cafes in the nooks and crannies of urban India and in its small towns, and secondly, with the immanent and rapid vernacularization of this internet where most international websites, blog sites and forums have rolled out their local language interfaces. *Sajan chale sasural* marks the moment where the more playful parts of the internet – not the internet of news, encyclopedias and institutions, but instead the internet of rapid user comments, of bad porn, of awkwardly made Bollywood forums and joke websites – begins to tell the stories that index a more feral modern. This is the casual internet, sometimes captivatingly personal, full of anonymous emotions and ideas and at other times vapidly hateful, full of gauche sort of jingoism and unfounded expertise on the Muslim or the woman question. It is this casualness that makes especial space for neologisms, for idioms to mix without precedents, for an unscripted assemblage to take place.

*Sajan chale sasural* tells the story of Rizwan, a young man in Delhi. In the transliterated purple Hindi prose, he is described as 'khoobsoorat sa haseen naujawan...lamba, gora, mast sa jawan

jo hamesha ladkiyon ke chakker mein rehta, ek do laundiya chodi to lund aur khunkhaar ho gaya, phir ek baar useey ek padosi ke saath sona pada aur subah tak usko laundeybaazi ka chaska bhi lag gaya' ('a beautiful, handsome young man...tall, fair, playful guy who was always entangled with girls, after fucking one or two of them his cock became more ravenous, then this one time he had to sleepover at his neighbour's and by the morning he got the habit of laundebaazi ['boyplay'] as well') (*peperonity*; accessed Feb, 2011).

Now Rizwan began arranging for boys from 'here and there' and enjoying himself with them as well ('unka bhi sukh bhogne laga'). Meanwhile marriage beckoned. Observing his cock's 'solid erection' on seeing the photo of the girl in question, he said yes to the match. The match, of course, was not premised on her sexiness alone; '[j]is ladki se uski shadi lagi thi wo kafi acchey badey ghar ki thi, uske father 5 saal se Dubai mein thay aur unke saath uske do bhai bhi wahin thay is liye paise ka tension nahin tha' ('the girl with whom his marriage was being considered, she was from a well-to-do family, her father had been in Dubai for about five years and with him were her two brothers as well, so there was no tension for money') (*ibid.*). Rizwan is a relentlessly modern boy possible only in the unofficial structures of the more recent Indian city. He himself runs an illegal restaurant that the local civic body threatens to tear down. He is the outcome of the 'pirate modern', his dreams of success lie within the decade-long trend of large scale migration to the Gulf countries – both of cheap semi-skilled labour who send money back home and of middle-class professionals who hope to make it even bigger in the Gulf. The turning point in the porn story is precisely the clash of the pirate city which sustains a Rizwan and the legal city which adjudicates on him:

'Phir ek din delhi mein MCD [Municipal Corporation of Delhi] ke bulldozer chalne lagey Rizwan kafi tension mein tha kyunki uska restaurant bhi illegal tha. Phir ek din uska restaurant tootne ka number bhi aa gaya,

market mein bahut bheed lagi, logon ne slogans lagaye aur aakhir jab bulldozer chalne lagey to Rizwan aur uske saathiyo ne pathraav shuru ker diya jispe police ne use arrest kerke muqadma chala diya' ('Then one day MCD's bulldozers began to move. Rizwan became very worried because his restaurant was also illegal. Then one fine day, the turn for his restaurant to be demolished came, lots of people crowded the market, people began to sloganeer against the demolitions but when the bulldozers approached Rizwan and his friends began throwing stones at them. When this happened, the police arrested him and slapped a case against him' (*ibid.*)

It is due to this protest that Rizwan reaches the jail where he immediately becomes the centre of attraction for the other inmates, young and old. It is here in the thick of the tale that the neologism spontaneously appears, becomes immanent in its messiness – 'Rizwan jail mein *gaybaazi* ke baarey mein to sun chukka tha ye pehli baar tha ki usko uska anubhav ho raha tha' ('Rizwaan had heard about *gaybaazi* in the jails but this was the first time that he was experiencing it himself') (*ibid.*: emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup>

Whereas we have noted the presence of the idiom of *baazi* (implying habit, play, addiction) in several flashpoints above – 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, where the idiom signals a desire for, or, a habit, even an addiction for *yaar* ('friend', 'lover'), for *randi* ('slut') or for *launde* ('boys') respectively – here that very register meets and accommodates another popular idiom in contemporary India,

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<sup>16</sup> In the rest of the story, Rizwan's family members borrow some money from the girl's family and somehow end his court case and get him released. On the wedding night, Rizwan discovers that his father-in-law and brother-in-law were the same two main men who had been fucking him in the jail all this time. The Dubai story had been a hoax - only one of his wife's brothers was ever working there. The whereabouts of the other two had been kept a secret. Rizwan goes ahead with the marriage nonetheless. In the coming days, the father and the brother, turn up at his restaurant frequently and get to fuck him in its back room. Rizwan takes out his emasculated rage on the girl. Other 'Hindi gay stories' on the website include titles like 'Train mein chudai' ('Train Fuck'), 'bhai se mulakaat' ('Meeting with the brother'), 'dilli mein shubh arambh' ('A Good Start in Delhi'), 'factory mein dhoom 1' ('Fun in the Factory 1'), 'Office mein marvaai' ('Fucked in the Office'), 'Padosi ladka' ('Neighbourhood Boy'), 'parlour ka gaandu' ('Faggot in the Parlour'), 'School mein naya ladka' ('New Boy in the School'), 'naai ne gaand maari' ('Barber Fucks the Ass') etc.

that of 'gay'. In *gaybaazi* this 'gay' of 'gay rights' and 'gay pride', of 'gay men' and 'gay fashion', endlessly syndicated in recent Indian media and film, both Hindi and English, meets the register of *baazi* that has a long history in the North Indian vernacular. 'Gay' is where the desire for the same sex has come to be historically framed as a matter of deep political and personal identity, where what you love has come to mean something central for what you are, something to be proud of. In the neologism, these deep identitarian strands mix with and get clumsily placed in ideas of habit and play of *baazi*. 'Gaybaazi' – the habit for gay things, playing about with being gay, doing gay sex – offsets the strong autobiographical and group element in the concept of 'gay', where it tries, always haphazardly, to mark the self and *those of the same kind*. Instead it injects 'gay' into another long, messy history of a non-medicalized addiction, of social habits that retain if only the signature of the feudal, of taking an excessive interest in things, of experiencing the self in play. Rizwan's tale is one out of countless instances of the coming together of idioms. This thesis sets out to outline the different idioms and then working out their newer and newer interrelations at moments precisely like Rizwan's story.

### **(iii) *Nigah* in Delhi Sexuality Politics, or, Disjointing *as* Method**

In or about the beginning of 2011, a small queer collective in Delhi *Nigah* found itself in the middle of a crisis of self-definition. Building up quickly on the heels of the July 2009 Delhi High Court judgment, which decriminalized adult consensual same-sex relations, this crisis of definition was a response to the changed climate of queer spaces in the *post* judgment city. The alleged watershedness of this legal order and its visible fallout in the city had triggered a

revision in the group's politics. This revision was framed precisely as a call for disjoining, trying to figure out what *different* role the group can play from other newly available spaces in the city, and how it can update itself to its new found situation.

*Nigah* was a collective started by a 'couple of' like minded middle-class or upper middle-class people who 'met through random circumstances' around 2003 in Delhi and realized that they were interested in similar issues of 'gender and sexuality' and 'also had a very strong belief in the various kinds of media as a tool for social change' (Arasu: c. 2005). The founding members were young, more or less in their early twenties, either in the last term of their B.A. at Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi University, or fresh returns from their undergraduate studies in the U.S., some were theatre performers and some 'worked'. Also, soon, there were students from the city's Jawaharlal Nehru University, where they had started J.N.U.'s first queer collective *Anjuman*. I use the term 'founding members' loosely because *Nigah* was always in a sense a loose collective, never overly formalized. Internally, it mostly worked as a network of friends.

Unevenly over the rest of the decade, the group became a cluster of some permanent, several itinerant members, many of whom were students, others worked in gender-based NGOs, in embassies, in autonomous feminist groups, in corporate offices, in PR firms, as photographers, or were finishing their PhDs offshore. This difference in profiles meant a regular diet of internal differences in vision and politics. 'No one can make any collective space be what they want to,' one of the *Nigah* members wrote reflecting on the group's past, 'and understandably it causes frustrations, some that we can live with, some that we can't' (Deepti; prsnl email: Mar 28, 2011). It was this space of debate and friendship that I had joined around July 2006 and continue to remain a part of it.



Slightly irregularly over this last decade, *Nigah* organized scores of cultural events like film-screenings, queer open mics, picnics and one off salsa workshops and play performances. Some of its members frequently went to Delhi University colleges doing workshops on ‘sexuality’ and the idea of ‘intersectionality’, and several in the group were part of organizing and participating in public demonstrations in the city on feminist, queer issues, often in association with other groups and NGOs. A few of its members also played a significant role in the Delhi-based group *Voices against 377* that filed its petition in the Delhi High Court, in support of the Naz Foundation petition, asking for a reading down of section 377.<sup>17</sup> Since 2009, *Nigah* has been organizing a yearly international queer film festival in Delhi. This was hosted in venues like the Indian Social Institute (ISI), which is a resource centre and research institution, connected to several people’s movement in India, specifically those around poverty, caste and agriculture, and the Max Mueller Bhavan, which is the cultural and educational wing of the German embassy in Delhi. Some of the *Nigah* members, in their roles outside the group, were also actively involved in issues relating to women’s rights and safety in urban spaces, communalism, sexuality training in Hindi among semi-urban groups, addressing human rights violations in situations of conflict, urban poverty and displacement, and corporate accountability, all debates which they tried to flag within *Nigah* as well, as friends, as members not invested in the singular issue of ‘sexuality’, as participants of its online and offline internal discussions. It was specifically these perspectives that were to initiate and deepen the debates about self-definition post the judgment.

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<sup>17</sup> For more on *Voices against 377*, and on the important debates that went in the drafting of its petition, see khanna, akshay, 2010, ‘The Social Lives of 377 - Constitution of the Law by the Queer Movement’ in *A Refracted Subject: Sexualness in the Realms of Law and Epidemiology*, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, pg. 118-142.

Over all these years, *Nigah* had become a meeting point, a space of friends, of friends of friends, and other ‘familiar faces’, which were often cast in the name of the queer ‘community’. It became a rare space for them to get together, often made cheerful by the appearance of ‘newbies’ or new faces in the audience, some of whom expressed interest in joining. The sense among the group members was, as one of them had put it, that ‘[w]hen *Nigah* began, it was one of the few available spaces’, that was not an AIDS-based or a women’s rights NGO with its rules and procedures, neither a support or counselling group with its specific formats, nor a collective geared specifically towards the legal fight against the anti-sodomy law (Arasu; prsnl email: Mar 28, 2011). It was instead a casual space for queer people – mostly English speaking and middle class – that mixed and matched between more ‘political’ events and informal, cultural ones, which it saw *as* political. This space, in that sense, also worked as a space of leisure, its events were also sites of flirtation and banter, its after-event drinks and dinner sessions among the members and their friends were as much part of the *Nigah* ritual as the organized event itself. Looking back at the decade, one member understood the group as being ‘incredibly political in a way that the politics do not weigh you down...allows for lightness to exist, understands contradictions, lets you breathe’ (Sharma; prsnl email: Mar 28, 2011).

However, as some members pointed out, this ‘lightness’ of *Nigah* was ‘both its strength and what it will always struggle with’; ‘it’s the push and pull that I love about it as a space even when its infuriating me’ (Bhan; prsnl email: Mar 28, 2011, sic). There were substantial contradictions between political vision and practice for several in the group. One was the almost consistent use of English and the other was the more or less familiar bandwidth of the audience it was catering over the years; ‘Queer Fest is talking,’ one member suggested during

the discussions over self-definition, 'to the same two degrees of who we know, it either needs to change in terms of who we talk to, or what we talk about' (Rastogi paraphrased in Bhan; prsnl email: Feb 19, 2011). In this bid, *Nigah* had started translating some of its publicity material into Hindi only towards the end of the decade, when not doing so seemed politically lax if not untenable. These debates often came up in its meetings as things to be seriously worked upon, especially after the judgement. There were fears that the group was sticking to its comfort zones. In these recent discussions, a member pointed out that 'we need to take that big move. For all events in English, we need events in Hindi. It's easier to do the English events. We need parity of number of events – but this is a drastic change, it's not just add one Hindi event types' (Arasu paraphrased in Bhan; prsnl email: Feb 19, 2011, sic). Discussions like this were also triggered by the general feedback about the unapproachability of the group. After some of its events, and particularly after the first film festival, the group often received emails that it appeared to be too 'closed-off' to outsiders, that it was difficult to figure out how to become part of it, that it was too cliquey. Words like 'elite' were not uncommon in such charges. These were not allegations that the group could simply deny but had to use as points of self reflection.

These debates spiralled particularly after the High Court judgment. From 'one of the few available spaces', *Nigah* now overwhelmingly found itself among a matrix of spaces that were doing the similar thing, that were geared towards creating 'gay' and 'lesbian' spaces, mostly the former, but of a different makeup and guided by a different political imagination. *Nigah* found that its job had been partially outsourced, reinvented, and sometimes thinned out politically. It found itself in the middle of an over-enthusiastic English and often Hindi print and television

media that were now regularly soliciting comments from 'Delhi's gay and lesbian community' about a film, or during annual Pride marches; at the time of writing, Delhi has had three Prides. They were no longer unhappy to pitch stories about the progress of the legal case against the anti-sodomy law which was now in the Indian Supreme Court. Some fortnightly English magazines had regular stories pitched as being of 'gay and lesbian' interest, if not a permanent 'gay and lesbian' events/comment four page spread. In answer to the many serious efforts over the last several years by sexuality activists and friendly sections of the media, the liberal language of 'sexuality rights' and 'gay' and 'lesbian' identities had more or less become common-sensical among the media circles. There were less and less aberrations in the story angle in the metropolitan English media – a pitch that was with a liberal bent, with secular 'progressive' reasoning, and talk of 'community' and 'growing acceptance'; all this despite the stories of some excited journalism graduates that edged on the simplistic and unresearched even when they were excruciatingly sincere.

There was also a multiplication of spaces of entertainment, leisure and enjoyment, most visibly for gay men. Groups like 'Boyzone Delhi', 'Gay Delhi' or 'Boyzrus Delhi' built upon the existing and far sparser network of 'gay and lesbian' discotheque parties – also frequented by *Nigah* members and its usual audiences – and took its frequency to almost five times a week, with differentiation that comes with expansion, of cover charges, of clientele, of 'gentry', of a everyday gentrification at the doors, of a more palpable, sometimes explicit resistance to 'drag' and 'those transgenders' at these parties than before, for the sake of the 'comfort level' of

individuals.<sup>18</sup> Groups and individuals organizing such parties had enough of a catchment area of customers now to compete over the turf. Other online and offline groups like 'Symphony in Pink' and 'Pink Delhi', which catered specifically to lesbian and bisexual women and had more or less reached an alleged consensus on emphasizing 'social and cultural events' and get-togethers over 'politics', also grew post judgment and were functioning as meeting points, as spaces of leisure, and were giving a sense of community to their participants. Such groups were, in a sense, doing the same job, a part of which *Nigah* had always seen itself doing – of making safe spaces for gay and lesbian people to meet – although in the *Nigah* version this was done in a more gender-mixed crowd, and as the group liked to believe, with a particular political spin on queer sociability and its possibilities.

*Nigah* now found itself in a climate where *creating a safe gay space* by itself, particularly for a middle class and English educated audience, was no longer as difficult as it had been before, no longer as persuasive a political project as it had seemed earlier. What was indeed difficult, more than ever it seemed, was working on *the contradictions in that space, of differentiating its internal priorities*, that is, precisely a problem of disjointing. 'When *Nigah* began, it was one of

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<sup>18</sup> The one palpable difference that I note is that the 'terms and conditions' of such parties organized in Delhi have gotten visibly more formalized and consistent, particularly in the post judgment city. One typical example is from the 'Sizzling Saturday' party hosted by 'Boyzone Delhi': 'TERMS & CONDITIONS/\* ENTRY WOULD BE 'STRICTLY' FOR "WELL DRESSED" PEOPLE ONLY. Its a request to you to be sensitive to the comfort level of others and to behave and dress up accordingly. Chapples,shorts and free casuals are not allowed. / \*RIGHTS OF ADMISSION RESERVED. / \*\*No sex on the premises; if found indulging in any "hanky panky" you shall be asked to leave the party / \*\*CLICKING PICTURES FROM ANY DEVICE (i.e.....mobile phones, cam.....etc.) IS PROHIBITED. / \*\*PLEASE TAKE CARE OF YOUR BELONGINGS. MANAGEMENT WILL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY THEFT OR LOSS. / \*\*During and after the party please DO NOT gathers outside the venue. The management has requested us to ensure that, in the middle of the night'.

the few available spaces,’ one member had said, as we noted above, she continued to point out that ‘[t]oday it is part of a complex set of contexts vis-a-vis queerness in India. The challenges are many and have changed’ (Arasu *ibid.*). For her, different questions now had to take centre stage, different kinds of urban venues had to be chosen, different audiences had to be found. It was here, in the urgency of these discussions, that disjointing was articulated as method. This form of disjointing had the importance of a strategy, the precision of historical detail, an eye for the changing contemporary, and the lucidity of humour – a member of the group had once joked in a meeting that ‘one good thing about the judgment is that *now* we do not have to bond together with those we always hated just because they are gay’ (prsnl conversation: July 2009). One of the post judgment phenomena was precisely this freedom to disband, of not always being together, of disaggregating one’s politics, methods and goals. A freedom to form other lines of solidarity.

‘For me,’ a member added, ‘the questions are who is left out of the victories of queerness that we see in our context so much more often nowadays...what does this mean in the contexts of a range of other social movements in our region’ (*ibid.*). She was pointing out a general climate where in it had become progressively easier to talk about ‘homosexuality’ and its ‘gradual acceptance’ in the popular urban news and entertainment media, even easier if it is affluent, English medium and male. But in this precise same climate, it was still quite difficult to raise other types of questions – questions which were not simply celebratory of the legal or the legislative apparatus of the Indian nation State. Specifically those questions that brought serious scepticism to the idea of a ‘9% growth’ ‘rising’ ‘super power’ India, that questioned India’s extensive military presence and ‘exceptional’ security laws in Kashmir, and in the Indian

North East, or those that tried to understand causes of the internal civil wars, notably the 'Maoist' uprisings in central and east India, not simply as perversion of dissent by violence, but instead in the policies of the post-liberalization government that had not made the benefits of this economic 'growth' reach most of the urban and rural poor in India, particularly its large tribal populations.

When it becomes easier to raise one kind of questions over other kinds, the member seemed to point out, when it becomes easier to raise questions of 'homosexuality' in its progressive, secular, nationalist and affluent avatar, it should always be a point of serious introspection as to why this ease is not equally distributed among the queers that come from other classes, genders, castes and political orientations, and also why this receptiveness has not been extended to other social and political mass movements that might overtly question the State government, not simply plead with it. These questions will then really determine where 'sexuality' activism is headed in relation with other people's movements. 'Raising such questions,' the same member believed, is 'fortunately or unfortunately...a celebration with critique of our victories' (Arasu *ibid.*). She found these questions slipping further away from the 'everyday reality' of *Nigah* and to bring them back into the fold, she was certain, 'requires a jolt...a jolt in what we do, how we do it, who does it' (*ibid.*). It requires an incisive exercise in disaggregation, of doing other kinds of queer work.

#### **(iv) Disjointing *as* Method: Outlining the Chapters**

This thesis takes this particular impulse of disjointing as its cue. It understands it both as a political method, in which *Nigah* is trying to pan it out, but also as a research methodology. It is squarely within the reinvention strategy of *Nigah* to see workings of same-sex desire in hitherto unlikely political contexts, in other forms and shapes, referenced by local languages, or used by other classes and groupings. These, it realizes, are not available simply as the mirror images of the globally circulating form of the 'homosexual'. It is disaggregation of this sort that I try to work in substantively in this thesis. Particularly in the choice of its material, the method and eclecticism of its referencing, the shape of its arguments, the form of its writing and, perhaps most significantly, in the way it understands modern India.

It is precisely this process of disjointing that gives us the many related 'idioms of same-sex desire' promised in the title, the liberal-scientific-democratic 'homosexual' being only one of them. This disaggregation takes different forms in different chapters. Each of them present the historical genealogies and material effects of these different 'idioms' – be it of friendship (*dosti*), of habit (*aadat*), of sentiments (*bhaav*), of play (*masti*), of personal likings (*shauk*), of love (*ishq*, *prem*) among others. All these real-time idioms are related to but in excess of the history of the 'homosexual'. They persist *with* it in the Indian contemporary. The composition of this contemporary defies any narrative of continual 'shedding' of these other idioms in favour of modern, 'progressive' ones. The modern, as we have noted earlier, is a messy home to an endurance of these idioms – a home to the democratic and the feudal, the sublime and the everyday, the scientific and the playful. This persistence – into a thus doubled contemporary – works both as the extension and the interruption of the 'homosexual'. Extension in the sense that the word 'homosexual' works only *as one of these many* idioms, but that, it also usually



appears with them, moulded differently, a bit more like them, embedded in their non-psychoanalytic, non-identitarian social meanings and cultural references. This happens most notably in the popular Hindi and Urdu literature and media, particularly in its sensational stories, where the category of 'homosexual' as 'होमोसेक्सुअल' or 'समालिंगी' (*samlingi*) is regularly used but with implications of friendly play, social excess, straying from the predictable path and decadent habit intact. And interruption in the sense that the 'homosexual' is always already unseated from being the only way to understand and talk about same-sex desire.

In the second chapter '*Laundebaazi*: Of Habits, Politics and Modernity in North India' the central figure of the 'homosexual' is first subjected to this disjointing. It is off-centred for the sake of seeing it in relationship with other idioms – this chapter does the off-centering precisely by attending analytically to the other idioms. From behind the liberal, legal setting, in which the 'homosexual' is staunchly placed, another elaborate local history is stolen and presented into view. This history is about another way in which same-sex desire has been imagined and has played out. This is the history of the North Indian idiom of *baazi* which presents social ideas of play, habit, sociable excess and quasi-feudal categories of *shauk* ('personal interests', 'likings') as effectively the places of same-sex desire – as its topoi and media.

The historical bandwidth of the chapter is more or less the twentieth century, culminating in this last decade, and its 'resource persons' include intricate Urdu writers like Ismat Chughtai (d. 1991), confused Hindi novelists like Pandey Beechan Sharma 'Ugra' (d. 1967), earnest Hindi poet-cum-scientists like Ramnath Lal 'Suman', itinerant American academics like Lawrence Cohen and Geeta Patel, and twice born literary reformers like Altaf Hussain Hali (d. 1914). Working with characters like bureaucrats' sons in Aligarh, *ghazal*-quoting teachers in Lucknow,

wilful students in Calcutta, dissolute governors in Gwalior, latter-day bohemians of Bombay, dubious social reformers in Benares, murder scandals in Uttar Pradesh and both fiery and lazy migrant poets, this chapter finds in the idiom of *baazi* a tenable and consistent patterning of male same-sex desire *as habit, as play, as metaphors of public politics, as familiar and social excess*.

This idiom of *baazi* is seen, and doubled, through the lens of a connected and simultaneous history in the subcontinent, that is, the history of another kind of patterning of same-sex desire – one mobilized by the idea of the ‘homosexual’ – with its medical, psychoanalytic and political moorings. This connected history is easily sighted in the real uncertainty of Hindi and Urdu writers of this time about whether to call this specific ‘subject’ a medical condition or an excessive habit, in early Indian Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) meetings in 1920s Calcutta, or in copies of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and the sexologist Havelock Ellis stacked in early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial libraries. This confusion – that is essential and formative – is persistent into the more recent times. In other words, the robust idiom of *baazi* survives and interacts with the liberal, progressive idiom of ‘homosexual minorities’ and ‘gay and lesbian rights’. The second chapter ends with the visible signs of their persistence.

The third chapter ‘On Planet Romeo: Indian Men as Migrants, Gay, Lovers and Friends’ reroutes the method of disaggregation through a current online space of a ‘gay dating website’ – *Planet Romeo*. This space is a perfect test case for this methodology. Bringing together more than fifty thousand Indian men, indiscriminately from most regions, all religions and down till the lower middle classes, and of varying capabilities with the English and the vernacular languages, this space becomes a heady mix of contemporary idioms of same-sex desire. People take on various

avatars – ‘sophisticated’ and ‘crude’ – in their user profiles. The sublime categories of the sign-up form – what sexuality are you, what particular fetish are you into, what is your exact penis size – are exceeded in the thicker texts of the user profiles where each of those categories get played with, get dispersed. People cast themselves to best suit their search. The chapter carefully, and cautiously, sieves them out into separate interrelated ‘figures’ – forms by which users become legible to each other, by which they can do what they come to do online. The four main figures are that of the migrant, the gay, the lover and the friend.

The big story of urban migration is extracted from a ‘gay dating website’ to be proposed as one of its main conditions of possibility. This proposition is made in two ways. One, online dating as a user response to the risks of physical cruising in urban and small town parks and as a search for comfortable privacy, and two, by way of understanding online experience as already of sort of *moving*, as an experience of itinerancy analogical to physical migration. The literal *going out* that almost always takes place in the generic coming-out format within gay and lesbian literature (and activism) is argued to be a piece of this core story of migration. After this, the other figure of ‘gay’ is put in relief by seeing it as embedded in its rhetorical and material setting of the ‘gay scene’. Here ‘gay’ works not so much as a durable self-definition than it does as an inconsistent gesture to participate in a group. It is something which reaches out to others, not only reflexively to oneself – it is in this sense that ‘gay’ becomes pragmatic, an object of tactical use rather than some wholesale adoption. The chapter follows how the relationships of individuals to the ‘gay scene’ are always at best wavering ones. It alters over time, around financial capability, around measures of adaptability, and personal interest. People are never simply part of the scene, they are either always coming in, or always leaving, mostly loitering in

it and using it, *checking it out*, and sometimes, being forced out of it. Their crucial separability from this figure of the 'gay scene', their disaggregability from it, that is always imminent, also highlights that no single idiom can singularly take over people's imaginations about themselves. That a crucial room is always left for other maneuvers, for other idioms, for other groupings.

The chapter ends with the figures of the 'lover' and the 'friend'. Each of them was derived from a close and perhaps far too enjoyable a survey of the user profiles on this dating website. The 'lover' on *Planet Romeo* is an eclectic cross product of the modern idea of romance and the Urdu tradition of 'ishq' – notably in the *ghazal* – which now resides in the interstices of this romantic idea, and exposes the contradictions at its heart. Romantic love – as outlined in Anthony Giddens (1993) and as modern *prem* in Sudipta Kaviraj (2006) – works with secular building blocks of what comes to be called 'mutual compatibility'. Several online profiles mention personal interests, stats, life-goals and desires to see if they *fit in* with someone else's. The idea of love works with expectations of novel-like narrative longevity and content, of relationships that are – *PR* users know – conflicted in realist terms, but one that try to *work* through all the conflicts, that try to gear affection for a life-time by mutual understanding and emotional labour. Yet romantic love – as evidenced here – also retains an almost 'unrealist', sacred investment in fantastic events like the 'first sight', the 'first meeting', the expected 'spark', the 'first love', 'the second love', and the relentless hope that the loving other will salvage one's life just by being around. This unrealism, this contradiction is the cue for the Urdu *ghazal*. Less pragmatic, more gushing, very non-narrative as a form which is unrealistically timeless in its yearning, it puts the 'realism' of romantic relationships on hold to explore the

more promiscuous, the more pathetic, the more inconsistent, and the less career driven ways of imagining people's encounters and affections online.

The figure of the friend, in its contemporary usage, is similarly plied open to see within it live traditions that are at odds with each other. Whereas the modern idea of romance tends to cast the 'friend' as a satellite being, of significance that is unerotic, compared to the primary 'lover', the male friend as the more vernacular *dost* carries with it intimations of *masti* 'play', not altogether unerotic, and of the friends' importance in one's circuits of life and work. This space cleared for friendship as *dosti*, however, is never in a smooth *continuum* with ideas of love and romance. It is instead marked by unpredictable interruptions between the familial and the playful, between the chummy brashness and the softer sentimentalism, the dutiful and the excessive, the friendly and the peculiar, and between the representable and the irresolvable. *Planet Romeo*, in being a lively home to all these different strands of friendship, love, gayness and migration, and in formatting them into endlessly distributable online media, becomes a key archive for disjoining the idioms of same-sex desire in contemporary India and a key field to see the double game being played out live.

The last two chapters are to be read together, in one big sweep, to get to the core argument of doubleness. Doubleness that is the real precipitate of the method of disjoining of idioms, its fallout in actual practice. Of the crucial simultaneity of idioms in the contemporary, of how their coincidence works in real terms. The second last chapter 'The Art of Personal Narratives: Sexuality and Story-Telling in Activism' paves into the last 'Gay Writing and its Doubleness'. Both are about editorial ventures that commission writing for a specific project. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan invite stories of 'queer lives' for a major section of their 2005 collection on

‘queer politics in India’, Aditya Bandyopadhyay and Vidya Shah cull out ‘stories of violence and tales of hope’ for the 2007 publication cum report on the ‘Kothi community’ in India, and Hoshang Merchant invites authors to submit to India’s first collection of ‘gay writing’ published in 1999.

The précis of the argument in these chapters is simple. Whereas editorial calls are necessarily specific – using certain politically viable terms, putting strategic submission limitations, being geared towards certain funding bodies and their criteria, or highlighting particular motifs – the collections that then actually come out from the editorial hands do not as much as toe these specific lines as they become a way of counterbalancing them, even questioning them, of mining their double potential. Of putting them into relief by supplementing them with characters, situations and concepts that are sometimes quite outside the immediate political mandate of the collections, of their general tone and vocabulary, and the major analytical frames provided by the editorial introductions. There is a very necessary subplot to this argument. It is that the editors are more or less aware of the main plot. They are not in the blind of what I repeatedly call ‘doubleness’, of the mismatches between the editorial call and the contributors’ material, in fact in some sense they predict it, try to clear space for it either by humility, by invitations for ‘diversity’, even when it is functional, by their ‘openness’, or by being strategically, even confusingly, inconsistent in looking for what they want.

The editors work with this ‘doubleness’ at the heart of their collections. They are aware that life-stories do not simply fit, that submissions play with and use the given ‘terms’ as much as they evidence them. That the category of ‘life’ is irreducible to the immediate political agenda that requires the form of ‘life-narratives’ and ‘personal testimonials’. That these testimonial

forms, these political genres of literature, have a very specific material history within feminist, civil rights, and sexuality movements since the 1960s in Europe and America. And that the togetherness of those stories in a collection, their sequencing and selection, is not simply natural, but is attributable to the specific and 'timely' editorial task that does versions of either 'queer politics' or 'AIDS epidemiology' or proposes path-breaking collections of 'gay writing' for a given region. When you sieve out the contradictory strands in the submitted stories, when you nitpick with their form and inconsistencies, when you look at the multiplicity and the compromises of the editorial motives, when you see the long-term self-questionings and doubts of the editors and their likes, you begin to find that this disjuncting – and its avatar in praxis: doubleness – is itself a way of doing politics. It is a way of keeping the political gambit open and self-reflexivity alive within it. It is as forthright, limited, viable and embedded, as it is, self-conscious, open-ended, dreaming and ripe for change. The small conclusion ends with some final notes on this political form of doubleness.

Finally, I must outline the boundaries of this thesis, the work that it quite clearly does not do. This thesis is decidedly *more* north-Indian and male than it is south or north-east Indian and female. Additionally, almost exclusively focusing on the specific equation of same-sex desire, has not allowed me to foray into the 'field' of Hijra and transgender issues, which requires a more independent analytical viewpoint and different spatial sites to roam about in.<sup>19</sup> Studying the culture of *baazi* that has a long history in North India, outlining and citing the experiences of 'sexuality' activism in Delhi, something that I have participated in, has largely contributed to the

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<sup>19</sup> For an excellent ethnography of Hijras in south India, see Reddy, Gayatri, 2006, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, New Delhi: Yoda Press.

regionally toppled focus of this work. Having said that, why these 'limitations' do not reflect themselves in the title (I could very well have said 'Idioms of *Male* Same Sex Desire in *North* India') is also important to point out. The chapters on personal narratives, on gay networking websites and on 'gay and lesbian writing' deeply reflect the regional eclecticism of those web-spaces and anthologies, with actors often coming indiscriminately from most, if not all, regions of India. And often when I discuss the concept of 'homosexuality', it has undeniable but always varying amounts of portability between men and women, a portability that I illustrate. Albeit my focus is toppled towards men, the actors that most help me analyse even those patterns of male sexuality, are often female (for example, most of the chapter of *baazi* is written under the sign of Ismat Chughtai). It is for these reasons that even as I acknowledge the clear limitations of this work, I hesitate to give them titular significance, for that would be misleading the reader.



## ***Laundebaazi: Of Habits, Politics and Modernity in North India***

### ***Why Laundebaazi?***

If there is a growing consensus that the colony was always a ‘laboratory of modernity’, not a simple site of exploitation, then we need to know what went into that lab experiment.<sup>20</sup> If we have more or less agreed on the metaphors of experiment as adequate to the colonial experience, then we need to know all the constituents of that experiment. Not simply as pre-prepared ideas that mix with each other but as sets of influences that were already in motion, and for whom the colonial experiment was another step in their movement, albeit a fierce one. In this chapter, I focus on the experiments around same-sex desire. I focus on *one* of the major constituents of that experiment – *laundebaazi* (habit for boys, inclination to play with them). If the ‘homosexual’ had more or less appeared by the 1920s on the colonial scene, residing in its university libraries and in specialized discussions among its metropolitan elite, then what were the other ways of framing same-sex desire that were interacting with it?<sup>21</sup> What were the back-

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the colony as a ‘laboratory of modernity’, see Ann Laura Stoler ‘Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and the Colonial Order of Things’ (London; Duke University Press: 1995) and Paul Rabinow’s ‘French Modern’ (Berkeley; University of California Press: 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Girindrasekhar Bose (1887-1953), the first president of the Indian Psychoanalytic Society (IPA), who corresponded with Freud for over twenty years, led a group of intellectuals, doctors, college professors, psychologists and enthusiasts in 1920s-50s Calcutta among whom discussions of ‘homosexuality’, ‘masturbation’,

stories of this experiment? The idea of the 'homosexual' brought with it connotations of being a medical circumstance, a condition, even a species of sorts, and came into being in the genres of sexological self-reports (after Havelock Ellis) and case-studies (after Freud). *Laundebaazi* was working in other ways. It was a social register that placed same-sex desire within the idea of habit, within a language of excess, not different in kind from opposite-sex desire but in degree, and in a continuum with other kinds of excesses like music, prostitutes, cards or alcohol. Unsurprisingly, the on-ground experiment between 'homosexuality' and *laundebaazi* works with a measure of solubility.

In this chapter, I first establish the general north-Indian idiom of *baazi* as bringing together social frames of habit and a familiar sort of excess. I then elaborate on *laundebaazi* not as a particular case within *baazi* (*laundebaazi* makes remarkable sense in the *not yet* of particularization) but as being possible within its pool. I also work out *laundebaazi* as a reigning political metaphor in crisis between the 'feudal' and the 'democratic' moments in twentieth century India. I finish off with some odd and recent precipitates that result from this experiment of modernity.

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'repression', 'oedipus complex' or 'female hysteria' were commonplace. In 1927, the annual bulletin of the 10<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the International Psychoanalytic Association at Innsbruck in Austria, reported the activities of its sub-branch, the 6 year old IPA that used to run its meetings in 14 Parsibagan Lane in Calcutta, the house of its president. It said that on 'February 5, 1926. The President [Girindrasekhar Bose] read a paper on the 'Genesis of Homosexuality' at a meeting of the association in his house (*Bulletin of the International Psycho-Analytic Association*: 1927). It goes on to add that 'many distinguished visitors and medical men attended the meeting and took part in the discussion' (*ibid.*). This, it says, was apart from the 'the usual Saturday evening discussions on various psycho-analytic topics' that were held at his residence (*ibid.*). Additionally, we should note that Calcutta University had already opened its Department of Psychology in 1915. For an excellent study of Freud in early twentieth century India, and on the history of the IPA under Girindrasekhar Bose, see Ashish Nandy's 'The Savage Freud: The First Psychoanalyst and the Politics of Secret Selves in Colonial India' (1995: 81-144).

**(ii) Baazi**

Near the end of the first chapter of her autobiography *Kagazi Hai Pairhan*, Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai (1915-91) writes about her habit for conversations. She creates densely packed scenes with her family and friends, all of them giving themselves up to the delight of talking. ‘

निहायत बक्कु ,’ (‘our family is exceedingly talkative’) (1998: 18). Time seems to have a loose grasp on her joint family in Aligarh and any chance meeting is an opportunity for endless chatter. ‘ - मिल है : हो नहीं -फिरते, - है,’ (‘when a few of them run into each other, they just lose track of everything.

Whether walking, sleeping or eating, they keep on jabbering’) (*ibid.*). This overwhelming passion to converse finds its high-point in the scene where ‘

है, मुबाहिंसा मे हिंस्सा है। : - खे निकालते है, जाते है . बातो सिल चलाये है,’ (‘This one character has to have a bath but is going on and on with the debate [*mubahisa*]. After every little while, he pops his head out of the window, keeps on soaping himself up and the series of conversations go on’) (*ibid.*).

Ashish Sahni, the Hindi editor of Chughtai’s transliterated text footnotes ‘मुबाहिंसा’ (*mubahisa*) with a word that straddles both Hindi and Urdu and is a sign of the immense contiguity of these languages: ‘ ’ (*bahasbaazi*), that is, the fervent habit for debate (*bahas*), for indulging in argumentative conversations, for the sport of talking (*ibid.*). This occasion of translation brings

together many of the meanings that are always implicit in the idiom of *baazi*. Sahni's use of *baazi* renders not only the specific Urdu word used by Chughtai but her entire familial scene of conversations with all its key features of leisure, amusement, everydayness, game, excessive habit and pleasure. 'मे ...बाँदेयो-बुड़

उनकी मलामते, गालियों सुनने में : लुप्त , ' (I find pleasure in talking with everyone...even annoying the oldies and then hearing their rebukes and abuses gives me a strange sort of fun') (*ibid.*).

Within a few lines, Chughtai brings to work this idiom of *baazi* herself. Later in her life when Chughtai started living in Bombay, like many other Urdu/Hindi literary immigrants of her time who found in mid-twentieth century Bombay new lives, money and jobs of writing film-scripts, dialogues, screenplays and song-lyrics, she found particular delight in the conversations she shared with this circuit of friends. With these immigrant literati, this very idiom of *baazi*, pervasive in the entire northern Hindi/Urdu belt and the north-western subcontinent, appeared with an unusual force in the creative and production networks of early Bombay cinema and indeed on that contemporaneous celluloid. She writes about her habitual conversations with the writer Soofia Jaanisar, sister of the Aligarh Urdu poet Majaz (1909-55) and the mother of the lyricist Javed Akhtar (b. 1945), with her close friend and Urdu short-story and film writer Sadat Hasan Manto (1912-55) and his wife Soofia, and with the Urdu poet Ali Sardar Jafri (1913-2000):

'सूफिया जानिसार      उसकी मुख्तसर      ज़िन्दगी में      बातें      की औरों      बरसों मिलकर  
    बातें :      - , -      मैं  
    उसकी      सूफिया      जाफरी      -      जुम्लाबाज़

['jumlabaaazi'] में लोगों की उन्हें अं की तल्खी,  
तुश्री शख्स की में , ही मिठास ... हैं, महफिलें

- , मोहतात सी हो गयी हैं,' ('I talked so much with Soofia Jaanisar in her brief life as I have not been able to with others despite being with them for ages. Talking with Manto always used to give such a keen edge to your feelings. Six-six, seven-seven hours use to pass by in minutes. His wife Soofia is also a very talkative woman. I have fun debating and phrase-playing ['jumlabaaazi'] with Sardar Jafri. Those who have talked with Sardar have an idea that as much bitterness, piquancy and sharpness that man's tongue might have, it has equal amounts of gentleness and sweetness...ever since he has gotten ill, these gatherings have become so dull, so lackluster.' (*ibid.* 18-9, italics mine)

जुम्लाबाज़ी ('jumlabazi') is an indulgence with phrases ('जुम्ला,' *jumla* is Urdu for 'phrase,' or 'sentence'), playing with them, throwing them about, competing in arguments with a clever use of words and ideas. It is a form of conversation that is a heightened, fiercer version of the form, being full of witty repartees, clever reversals, literary citations and dazzling ideas. The suffix *baazi* always brings this element of play, performance and of a familiar excess to that to which it is joined.

In writing about the history of the changing forms of the Urdu poetic gatherings, the 'musha'ira,' from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century in colonial India, C.M. Naim noted that the root sense of the older Perso-Arabic word 'musa'ara' referred 'to a poetic contest in which two persons or groups exchange couplets back and forth, each being required, for example, to respond with a couplet beginning with the letter with which the opponent's couplet ends' (1989: 167). This sense survives in the northern subcontinent in contests that were and are called '*bait-bazi* ('the game of couplets')' (*ibid.*).

More than just 'reading poetry before an audience' (*ibid.*), *bait-bazi* would have an added sense of playfulness, of an in-house match of couplets. The traces of such gaming remain in the

twentieth century Indian 'musha'ira' when one poet tries to outdo the other in wit, in poetic skill, in styles of delivery and the entertainment of the audience. The competitive play continues in their efforts to find the most unusual rhymes or the most original nuances in their poetic recitations to enthrall the *mehfil*, the gathering (169-73). *Baazi* is an expressive idiom of heightening the usual, of cherishing a sociable overindulgence, of playing a game. It connotes feverishness and an extraordinary, possessive love for the prefixed object. It is a complex of habits formed by the admixture of extreme skill and a passionate attachment to this object, of poets with their couplets, for instance. In any condition, the presence of *baazi* in a particular situation or persona, divorces it from any immediate claims of moderation or of sobriety.

*Baazi* qualifies as an idiom because it is capable of a cluster of associations. It is a mode of expression that sets off specific relations between people and the objects in the world around them. Chughtai's autobiography repeats this idiom incessantly to frame an assortment of characters, situations and substances that were a part of her world. *Jumlabazi* makes another appearance as something which Chughtai kept up with her *dilchasp* ('interesting') friend Prithvi Singh in Bareilly where she was a school teacher (Chughtai: 193). They pulled each other's legs in such conversations, Chughtai recalls. *Baitbaazi* is referred when Chughtai talks of the singing contests that she used to participate in with her school and college friends (198).

Later, in recounting her B.A. days in Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, there is a mention of *kalabaazi*, 'acrobatics,' which Chughtai's mind performs when she fails to reconcile her classroom discussions of Darwin's theory of evolution and the Koranic/Biblical story of the genesis. *Kala* actually means 'art,' or even 'skill'. Its use to signify mental somersaults in 'kalabaazi' here is an expressive form in which *baazi*, itself implying 'game' or 'bet,' has become

a dead metaphor. 'देमाग कलाबाज़ियों खाने लगा,' ('my mind started performing acrobatics') (256). The dead metaphor reappears in *chaalbaaz*, the trickster or the cunning one ('chaal' means a 'ploy,' or 'a move in the game'), used by Chughtai's relative, Ala Bi, to refer to the washer-man who she suspects of replacing her new clothes with old ones. 'पकड़ा नहीं जाता,' ('he's a big dodger, you can't catch him') (143). Similarly *jaanbaazi*, which in its root sense, refers to someone ready to sacrifice her life ('jaan'), ready to play with it, but which generally implies bravery or gallantry, is used by Chughtai to describe her own pluck in one of the more severe quarrels with her mother (112).

The most active function, however, of the idiom of *baazi* is where it indicates a habit for something, a habit that could also be in surplus. It is where the habit intensely saturates some of the living worlds of the person, poised at the limits of the usual. *Baazi* as a form of habit is always elastic. It can index the more regular, prized habits, such as that of exercise (*kasratbaazi*), of mugging before exams (*rattabaazi*), or of little excesses in betel chewing (*paanbaazi*) or arguments (*bahasbaazi*). It can also index a range of what are as ordinary but proverbially more value laden, the 'bad habits,' that can involve alcohol (*darubaazi*), laziness (*sustibaazi*), or devious politicking and groupism (*naarebaazi*, *partybaazi*).

This idiom makes sense of the person, the *baaz*, in a mis-en-scene with a ready potential for self-indulgence and excess that could be either fascinating or revolting or both. It plies on the category of *shauk*, Urdu word for personal inclinations, sociable cultural habits, or one's own hobbies, till it teases out of the bounds of what is deemed as mere duty. It moves beyond the mundane range of self-possession, either by extreme talent or by exceptional surrender or both.

It is set off when one becomes, for that moment, zealously attached to one's own interests, either accomplishing them or giving in to them.

It should be understood that this element of excess by itself is not unusual or surprising. As an expressive form in the early-mid twentieth century, one or another form of *baazi* attaches itself very *ordinarily* to specific groups like poets, artists, prostitutes, landlords, bureaucrats, politicians and the *goondas*, effectively marking the distinctive scenes of their lives and work. It is of a piece with their everydayness. Chughtai's cousin Hashmat Jahan, daughter of an estranged aunt, tells her a family story about their uncle Mirza Nayeem Beg Chughtai, once the governor of Gwalior:

‘ , -मिज़ाज थे - [‘randibaazi’]. एक दिन जलसा जमा हुआ था बारहदरी में. चरांगा से बाग़ जगमगा रहा था और रंडियों के तायफे महला को गुलज़ार

...अय्याशी और नशाबाज़ी [‘nashabaazi’] ने उन्हें बिल्कुल मस्त कर दिया ’ (‘yes, he had a colourful temperament. Only wine and kebabs and always with whores. One day, the gathering of friends had met in Barahdari. The whole garden was shining with lamps and the entire palace was itself like a small garden with all the harlots...debauchery and his habit of drinking always used to keep him intoxicated’) (*ibid.* 72)

*Randi* is more informal than ‘prostitute’ and cruder than ‘slut.’ *Nasha* is ‘intoxication’ by alcohol or narcotics or both. *Baazi*, as we see here, never simply resides in a person, the *baaz*, but always makes sense in an entire setting, in a dense ambiance. In other words, *baazi works with personas*. The gathering of male friends in the graceful halls, the entire garden shining with lamps and the dancing-girls strewn like flowers in palaces build up the full *mis-en-scene*. This is the place of *baazi*. It necessarily concatenates one form of indulgence with another and makes up a dense tapestry of dissipation, a cluster of ways of savouring ‘bad’ habits, of intensifying one’s experience to one’s ceremonial liking or to the threshold of one’s artistic vocation.



The scene of *baazi* involves a mixture of innocuous habits, of self-indulgent practices and of more treacherous addictions. Its persona, the *baaz*, in the early-mid twentieth century feeds off the contradictions between cultural practices of leisure and medical concepts of addiction, between civil parliamentary politics and extremist nationalism, between ideas of genius and failure, between 'useful' 'progressive' art and 'decadent' 'backward' scribblings and between reformist ideals of self-possession and poetic values of surrender.

In the winter of 1989 and in the following summer, when Geeta Patel (b. 1957), writer and scholar based in the U.S., returned to Bombay to find out more details about the life and writings of the Urdu poet Miraji (1912-49), she found herself in the middle of thick conversations about 1930s/40s Bombay with the Urdu poet and scriptwriter Akhtarul Iman and his wife Sultana (2001: 9-13). During the last years of his life, finding it increasingly difficult to make a living with his art and gradually abandoned by most of his friends and his health, Miraji had lived with the couple in their small house in Bandra. The scenes that Patel gleans from these conversations, of the worlds of immigrant writers that were attached to film production houses in various capacities, and were friends and acquaintances of each other, is an exemplary setting of the practices and the contradictions implicit in the culture of *baazi* in early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sultana recalled 'a community of male poets who would come to her house to be fed, to drink, and to talk about poetry' (12). She would talk and recall vivid scenes of

'...raucous nights when people fell asleep in her living room. She talked about listening to complicated discussions of poetry and politics that would heat up into arguments fueled by drink. She described the graphic aftermath, walking delicately between strewn bodies, cleaning up cups and vomit. She opened up for me the anxieties of a time when work and money were scarce and friends lived in her house because there was nowhere else to go' (*ibid.*)

This is a setting where useful discussion is hard to sieve from wasteful banter, where an urban literary bohemia is at the same time forming and coming apart, where alcohol is both a soft, conventional trigger for poetic inspiration, a must for a ‘mehfil,’ and also a hard ‘substance’ of excessive abuse, and where the terms of self-possession and self-control hold at best an ambivalent value; ‘...उदू कवियों की बेहोशी भी बड़ी ; ,’ (‘even the intoxication of the Urdu poets is very clever’) (Ugra; 1951: 21). The figure of the *baaz* could simultaneously be fêted for his genius and undermined for his ‘weaknesses’. He could have fruitful arguments about politics and poetry and also slouch half conscious in his own vomit. The performance of his habits could be readily devoured and his moments of power could be viewed in awe, even as his morals could be berated and his failures framed as general warnings. It is this fleshy idiom of *baazi* – working in an elaborate mis-en-scene, capable of copious associations, both innocuous and fatal, triggering a set of contradictory responses in its audience – whose cast includes that figure of the *laundebaaz*, he who has a habit for boys (*launde*).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> C.M. Naim translates the *laundebaaz* generally as a ‘pederast,’ but literally as a ‘boy-player’ (2004: 35). Moreover, in her book ‘Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards’ (2005), while studying the ‘gender and sexual anxieties’ of turn of the nineteenth century ‘Iranian modernity’, Afsaneh Najmabadi re-membered the history of the figure of the *amrad*, that is not very different from the *launda* of *laundebaaz* in my discussion. Talking of early Qajar paintings and poetry in Iran, she notes that they were ‘populated by the hur and more commonly by the ghilman (also referred to as *amrads*...beautiful young beardless men) who often double as wine-servers...Today,’ she writes, and I find her discussion partially relevant to my own about *laundebaazi*, ‘these figures are often translated as “boys,” and *amradparasti* [or *amradbaazi*] (loving *amrads*) rendered as “boy-love.” I refuse,’ Najmabadi continues, ‘to use this naming because of the close affiliation of ‘boy’ with contemporary implication of pedophilia and our identification of “boy” as child. In pre-modern and early modern Persian male homoerotic culture, an *amrad* was more often a young male, in contemporary usage an adolescent, although he could be even in his early twenties, so long as he did not have a fully visible beard. In fact, an adolescent with the

### (iii) *Laundebaazi*

In June, 1928, the third edition of the Hindi writer Pandey Bechan Sharma 'Ugra's novel *Dilli ka Dalal* ('The Pimp of Delhi') was published and printed under the aegis of his friend and mentor Mahadevprasad Seth. This third edition, printed at Seth's Baalkrishna Press in Calcutta and published by his Beesvee Sadi Pustakalay ('Twentieth Century Bookhouse') in Mirzapur City carried advertisements and critics' recommendations for other works by Ugra. First among these was a full page blurb for his controversial collection of short-stories *Chaklet*, compiled and published the year before in 1927:

‘समैं उग्रजीकी उन कहानियोंका संग्रह है जिन्हें पढ़ कर आप कलेजा थाम कर रह जायेंगे। समाजके

‘लौंडे- ‘ [‘launde-baazi’] के भयानक परिणामका ममभेदी दिग्दर्शन करानेवाली :

सफेदपोश नरराक्षसोंके घिणित हथकण्डोंका - चित्रण है की इसे पढ़ लेने के बाद अबोध

अबोध बालक भी इन नारकिय जीवोंको देखते ही पहचान जायेगा और इनके प्रलोभनों :

पापियों के दुव्येसनोंके कारण सवे नाशकी ओर अग्रसर होते हुए देशको भी बचानेमें समर्थ

पुस्तक की उपादेयता और आठ सबसे बड़ा प्रमाण इसके प्रथम संस्करण का दो महीनेके अल्प्काट

ही समाप्त हो जाना है। बढ़िया मोटे एंटिक कागज़पर छपी २१६ पृष्ठोंकी पुस्तकका मूल्य केवल प्रचार की दृष्टि

) ,’ (‘This is a collection of those short stories by Ugra ji that will make you hold your hearts

while reading them. This book, which gives a stinging portrayal of the horrible consequences of the ever increasing misdeed of our society ‘launde-baazi’, has such an animated description of the devious strategies

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first trace of a mustache (*nawkhatt*) and before the full growth of facial hair (a process that could take a number of years) was considered the most beautiful. At the same time, that hint of a mustache (*khatt*) heralded the beginning of the end of his status as object of desire for adult men and his own movement into adult manhood. It signaled the beginning,’ as is rigorously transcribed in much Persian and Urdu verse, ‘of his lover’s loss’ (2005: 15). Although I often use the word ‘boy’ in translating *launda*, I want the reader to keep Najmabadi’s definitional variations in mind.

of the deceptive male demons, that after reading this, even the most innocent of boys of our society will be able to recognize these hellish creatures as soon as he sees them, and not only will he be able to save himself from their seductions but also save the nation that, due to the addictions of such rascals, is heading towards destruction. The biggest proof of the utility and the necessity of this book is the fact that its first edition was sold out in the brief period of two months. The price of this 216 page book, which is printed on excellent, thick antique paper, has been kept at 1) only from the perspective of the dissemination of its message') (Ugra; 1928: appendix 3, see fig. 1)

Another candidly provocative advertisement for *Chaklet* appeared in the third edition of Ugra's epistolary novel *Chand Haseenon ke Khutoot* ('Letters of Some Beautiful Ones') published in December later that year (see fig. 2). Writing the preface to this short story collection ' ('Chaklet'), Pandey Bechan Sharma whose nom de plume 'Ugra' implies 'fiery' or 'forceful,' had filed 'launde-baazi' within a catalogue of allied bad habits, targeting not only an isolated transgression but an entire scene of social misdeeds:

यदि परस्त्री गम , वैश्यागमन, शराबखोरी ['sharaabkhorī'], जुआ खेलना आदि समाजिक पाप हैं, ;  
अप्राकृतिक-कमे या चाकलेट- ['chaklet-panthi'] . यदि उन पापों के विरुद्ध समाज प्रचा-  
-प्रत्यालोचना भी, तो इस पापके विरुद्ध भी प्रचार और आलोचन

चाहिये. ('If adultery, going to prostitutes, alcoholism ['sharab' is 'liquor,' 'khorī,' implying consumption, is a device similar to 'baazi'], gambling etc. are social evils, then this unnatural deed or chaklet-panthi ['chaklet,' Hindi transliteration of 'Chocolate,' was Ugra's peculiar reference for young, beautiful boys, 'panthi,' implying habit, is a device similar to 'baazi' or 'khorī'] is a major evil. As this society voices itself against those evils and openly debates and denounces them, similarly, it should also have public voices and criticism against this evil.' (Ugra; 1927 (1953): prefatory page)

*Launde-baazi*, or *chaklet-panthi*, is cast in the same mould as other allied forms of indulgences that are to be targeted by what is here, at any rate, formally, even if bluntly, articulated as a social-reformist literary aim. *Laundebaazi*, for Ugra, is part of a constellation of the misdeeds of demonic, hellish men and becomes recognizable precisely *as part of this constellation*, precisely as of a piece with its mis-en-scene of debauchery. It is positioned as yet another, albeit in this

example a more intense, form of dissipation, compared to alcoholism or gambling along with which it is listed.

However, I must point out that a potential *extractability* of such figurations of male-male desire, such as *laundebaazi*, from their supersets of bad habits, always looms around in early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial India. An extractability from the constellation of habits precisely *as* a particularized evil as against just an indiscriminate habit. As a cognizably separate ‘unnatural deed,’ or even as a taxonomic ‘svajaatiya-vyabhichaar-vriti,’ literally ‘licentiousness-inclination-with-same-kind’, translated as ‘[h]omosexual [t]endency’ in the preface to Ugra’s stories (Suman; 1927: 41). Such a form of extractability never fully comes about but it implies a potential independence of male-male desire from the generalized mis-en-scene of excesses in which it is set – understood as *something unique in some kinds of people*. This extractability is evident in Chughtai’s confusions over what to call the subject of *Lihaf* and in the early phase discussions of the Indian Psychoanalytic Society cited earlier. For now, however, it would be our task to elaborate on how the constellation of bad habits is organized, and more precisely, how does *laundebaazi* relate to the other forms in the family of connected weaknesses.

On the first of July in 1927 Ramnath Lal ‘Suman,’ a Hindi critic and poet, finished and signed off his almost 50 page essay that was to be published that same year as a major prefatory piece to Ugra’s eight short-stories in *Chaklet*. This essay ‘अप्राकृतिक व्याभिचार वैज्ञानिक विवेचन’ (‘A Scientific Investigation of Unnatural Licentiousness’), Suman says, was written on the special request of Ugra, his ‘close brother,’ (*ibid.* 59), and its modest aim in fulfilling this duty is to simply work as a ‘scientific commentary’ on ‘this hellish subject’ (21-2). Though claiming only an

introductory knowledge to the topic, Suman goes on to write extensive, sometimes didactically framed but mostly speculative sections on the origins of such habits, the inner animal elements in all human-beings, the role of human-beings as social creatures, the etiology of all human desire as such, the excess as reason of attraction to the same kind, the ideals of calm desires, among many other subtopics.

When he is about to conclude, he appends his 'scientific investigations' to the official social reformist project of Ugra's stories. He does this by tagging on some means that could be 'generally' employed to reduce the incidence of 'chaklet-panthi' (57). These solutions are a key to understand the composition of the place that *laundebaazi* occupies in the imagination of the early-twentieth century Hindi literati:

' . स्कूलोंमें बोर्डिंग-सिस्टम व दिया  
. शिक्षाके लम्बे- चारों हों प्रत्ये की ' ' दूसरेकी -  
- 'बेंच-सि ' ( ही बेंच बालकोंके बैठनेकी प्रणार ) दी  
. पौरुष अनिवाये व दिये जा  
. -शिक्षाका प्रबंध किया (धार्मिक-शिक्षा : नहीं) शरीर-विज्ञानकी : शिक्षा दी  
. मास्टर्स लड़कोंके चरित्रपर उन्हें निकाल दिया . मास्टर्सको  
अधिकार इंस्पेक्टरव लड़कोंको निकालनेका अधिकार प्रधानाध्यापकको दोनोंकी  
लिए चरित्रवान आदमियों की छोटी कमेटी  
. स्कूलमें , सिगरेटका . अन्य नशीली चीज़ोंसे रहें,  
इसकी चेष्टा की  
. वर्षे : उम्रके -भ पूरे फि सके।  
. कटेमूड़की ' - बातें, ' रातमें : , ' - ' अश्लील उत्तेजक पुस्तकें ज़ब्त की  
में - बिकने . घिा तसवीरें : दण्डित किये

वर्षों से अवस्था के बालकों के गले में जुमे दिया;  
 पिता बच्चों में विलास प्रवृत्ति रोकें. नौकरों अधिक न करें लड़कों को  
 बनावें।  
 मास्टरों के विरुद्ध जानेवाली प्रकार की शिकायतों स्थायी रजिस्टर  
 इंस्पेक्टर द्वारा निर  
 लड़कों को नाचगान में शरीक होने रोकें. कोशिश क सांस्कारिक उत्स में  
 वेश्याएं इत्यादि

- (‘1. The boarding system in schools should be banned by law.
2. The classrooms should be long and wide, open on each side, and every boy’s ‘seat’ should be at a minimum distance of two yards from other seats. ‘Bench system’ (the system whereby many boys sit on the same bench) should be removed.
3. Exercise and games that boost manliness should be made mandatory.
4. A study of ethics should be set up (not a study of religions). There should also be a little physical education.
5. Those masters and students, whose characters are a least bit suspect, should be removed. The local inspector should have the right to remove teachers and the principal should have the right to remove students. For their help, a committee of serious men, of wholesome character, could also be set up.
6. The consumption of betel and of cigarettes should be stopped in schools. Even at home, there should be an effort that boys should remain away from these and other intoxicating substances.
7. Boys of 20 years or less should watch only those films and plays that are based on bravery and patriotism for the nation.
8. Obscene and provocative books like Savaayaar Katumedh’s ‘Do-do Batein,’ ‘Raat mein Saat,’ ‘Tota-Maina’ should be ceased. Those who sell nude and disgusting pictures openly in the market should be punished.
9. Walking with your hands over the shoulders of boys who are 16 years or less should be declared to be a crime.
10. Parents should stop the tendency towards luxury in their kids. They should not be made very dependent on the servants and the boys should be trained to become self-made.
11. These sort of complains against the teachers should be filed in a permanent register that the local inspector should inspect from time to time.
12. Parents should stop their boys from taking part in singing and dancing. Efforts should be made that prostitutes and others of the ilk should not be called for communal and cultural programmes.’) (ibid. 57-9)

The involvement of boys in *laundebaazi* happens in an environment where one form of indulgence triggers another. This involvement is not conceptualized as a preset personal state of being but instead as a gradual corrosion. It becomes meaningless without its atmosphere of obscene books and pictures, betel-nuts and cigarettes, laziness and luxury, corrupting films and plays and singing and dancing. ‘...smoke and chew betels, / no, no, *all intoxicants are alike*’ (Habib; 1995: 327; emphasis mine). The means to remedy this particular habit among boys is not proposed as a diagnosis for a localized, individual condition but instead as a larger, necessarily continuous road-map towards an ideal social manhood.

This road-map involves an excoriation of softness in favor of a robust and brave personal character, which was frequently articulated in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hindi nationalist publications like *Aaj* (‘Today’) (estbd. 1920, Varanasi) and *Swadesh* (‘One’s Own Nation’) (estbd. 1921, Varanasi), and imagined by Suman and his contemporaries as necessary to the fight for political self-determination. In the throes of the Gandhi-led non-cooperation movement (1920-22), the twenty-one year old Ugra had articulated his feverish *kaamna* (‘aspiration’) for an independent nation, an aspiration which was framed as a poetic manifesto for vigour and force, and a castigation of the whole aesthetic of political pliability and of a spongy, feminine civility. His poem *Kaamna* had appeared in Shiv Prasad Gupta’s newspaper *Aaj*:

‘भयंकर ज्वालायें

जाग उठें, सब ओर आग की ही हो जाए भरमार!

मधुर रागिनी नहीं चाहते --

और न स्वर सुकुमार!

वज्र- - !...’

(‘Fierce Flames



Should rise, in every corner should this fire reign!

We do not desire a soft song –  
and no tender voice!

May our heart-strings strike like thunderbolts!') (quoted in Ugra's autobiography *Apni Khabar*; 1960: 111)

Apt for such a fierce nationalist *kaamna* voiced by his friend, Suman's solution is not offered as a simple conversion from one predetermined state to another but instead as a permanent path of self-improvement, flagged, for instance, with routines of exercise and robust, manly games, a study of ethics and independence from servants. The *laundebaaz* has no easy antonym or obverse, like the 'homosexual' finds in 'heterosexual,' it is instead conceptualized on an awkward sliding-scale of self-fashioning, where one's path, an ideally unremitting path, towards social usefulness and ideal communal roles has been partially undermined.

Suman suggests a series of solutions, some more impractical than others, to reinstitute the *baaz* back into the process of realizing his ideal social and political functions. The figure of the *baaz* is, even when socially disapproved, always conceived of as morally and socially reclaimable. Theoretically, there is never an unbridgeable gap or a separate ontology that keeps him away from a possible repatriation<sup>23</sup>.

In the short-story that was first published in May, 1924 in the Calcutta based paper *Matvala* and later appeared as the title-story in the collection *Chaklet*, Ugra weaves in an elaborate

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<sup>23</sup> In fact the underlying idea in much of Ugra's writings, if we sieve through his social-reformist zeal, is that having some bad habits (especially if one is a man) is what makes one ordinary, what makes one human, similar to most others. It is in fact 'extraordinary' or 'unusual' to have no bad habits at all. In his memoir *Apni Khabar* published in 1960, Ugra, talking of one of his 'respectable friends' who had deep interest (*shauk*) for poetry and for exercise, and who had lost his heart, when young, to a male hockey player with a well-formed body, and later, after getting married and having children, to a prostitute, he writes, 'I must say that I really like such willful men, despite their defects [*aib*, weaknesses]. Who is without weaknesses? Only God' (1960: 124-7). For more on the 'fall' into same-sex desire as a 'fall' into ordinariness, into the quotidian, see Amarkant, (1959) 2004, *Sukha Patta*, New Delhi: Rajkamal Paperbacks, pg. 34-6.

scene of *baazi*. The opening sequence does not introduce a character alone but an entire demeanor:

“बेकरारी क्यों शिकारे इश्क ,  
दिलपर  
उपयेक्त स्वर - करुण-स्वर - दिनकर प्रसाद , मतवालेकी  
कुसी मैंने मनमें विचार किया, क्या ? सुस्त क हैं? फिर  
-  
“खैरियत ? हैं।”  
दिनकर फिर लम्बी ...’

(“Why should I not be restless, love has made me its prey,  
Today my heart carries a wound like never before.”

Reciting the verses above in a soft voice – a piteous voice – our friend Babu Dinkar Prasad B.A. tumbled onto the chair like a sot. I thought, what is the matter? Why is he so languid today? Then I asked –

“Is everything all right? Sir seems to have become a Majnun today.

After a long sigh, Dinkar Babu said...”) (Ugra; *ibid.* 97)

The sequence is replete with soft voices and long sighs, with gushy recitations of lovelorn Urdu couplets and languid tumblings onto chairs. The opening shots feature Babu Dinkar Prasad not simply as an individual person but more crucially as a persona, fitted with the generalizable traits of the *baaz*. He is a sot, under the influence of wine and love, and is mythified by being likened to the legendary lover, Majnun, of the classical Perso-Arabic story of star-crossed lovers.

Gopal, the over-ingenuous narrator is surprised by Dinkar’s spontaneous ‘कावेता पाठ : ,  
(‘poetry reading event’) (98) and his general stupor. Soon, as Dinkar leaves by being called upon the door by the object of his love, Gopal is told by another friend, Manohar, the reason for Dinkar’s peculiar manner. He has fallen, Manohar says, for a boy, his ‘chaklet,’ his ‘pocket-book,’ a ‘13-14 year old beautiful lad’ (99-100). True to the contagious world of ‘bad influence,’ the

persona of the younger loved object is cast in the protracted shadow of the decadence of its lover. In a letter that Manohar writes to Gopal, to share his thoughts on 'this subject' (*ibid.* 102), he says that:

‘देश के नवयुवक ज़नाने हुए जा रहे हैं। एक बालक जब यह देखता है की उसके दूसरे साथी पर अधिक लोग आकर्षित , तब वह भी अपने साथी का अनुकरण करने की चेष्टा करने लगता ‘वेनोलिया’ , ‘व्हाइट-रोस’ , ‘पियर्स’ की सहायतासे चाकलेट बनने की चेष्टा आरम्भ होती है लड़कों की पढ़ाई-लिखाई का समय सुन्दर बनने के प्रयत्न में चला जाता और रूप की दुकानदारीके फे पड़नेके कारण उनके मस्तिष्क , वासनाएं प्रबल और आदतें घृणित हो जाती हैं’ (‘The youth of this nation are becoming more and more feminized. When one boy sees that more people are attracted to his friend, he starts mimicking this friend. After Venolea he uses White-Rose, after White-Rose, he uses Pears Soap; all these help him begin his attempts in becoming a *chaklet*. The time which could have been spent in studying is wasted in becoming beautiful. Once they are deeply entrenched in this business of beauty, their brains become weaker, their lusts stronger and their habits more disgusting.’) (*ibid.*)

Later when Gopal is visited by Dinkar and his young friend at his house, Gopal notices that the boy had ‘playful eyes’ and was like a ‘beautiful flower,’ an ‘offering of the Gods’ (103). He could become a ‘beautiful Indian,’ he muses, if it were not for Dinkar. The older men corrupt boys, who could have become valuable citizens of a liberated nation, and the boys corrupt each other. The figures participating in *baazi* – and organizing this entire scene of corruption and self-indulgence – are cumulatively materialized with the debasing consumption of imperial cosmetics like *Venolea*, *White-Rose*, *Pears Soap* (see Gadihoke 2010).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Chocolate, then, made sense. It was part of the catalogue of imperial products that came to be seen as degrading, but not degrading in any localized way, as if for the palette or for the stomach, but degrading in a very a widespread, general manner. What Manohar mentions, *White-Rose*, *Pears*, *Venolia*, all these commodities, dotted the homes of the middle-classes of his colonial city Calcutta. It was the soap industry, in fact, as Anne McIntock and Sabeena Gadihoke have reminded us, which was a first major imperial net of products, furiously advertized in the colonies, so much so that for the longest time, just advertizing, be it for anything, was also called ‘selling soap’ (Gadihoke: 2010: 1, McIntock 2001). Images of soap advertisements, that were regular in colonial English

In another story 'Paalat,' in the same collection by Ugra, *baazi* is presented as a space assembled with fineries. The beloved boy is described wearing 'चिकनका बगला कुरता, मखमली पोतकी - विंचेन ढग से पहनी - , बाँधिया प - , रिस्तवाच, तिरछो ट , ' ('an embroidered Bengali kurta, a velvety dhoti worn in a strange manner, excellent pump shoes, wrist-watch and an askew cap') (Ugra: *ibid.* 118). The finery of clothes and accessories contributes to the patterns of excessive habits, stitching together the world of *baazi*. It becomes the place where *various* forms of male desires are articulated. The desire for boys is framed as contiguous with this love of fashion.

In the tenth chapter of her autobiography, 'The Golden Spittoon,' Ismat Chughtai talks of the twins, Munne Miyan and Pyare Miyan, who were enrolled with her brother at the Aligarh University. In Ugra's official social-reformist schema, these boys would be seen as symptomatic of the moral and physical waning thought to be brought about by fashion, cosmetics and luxury,

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newspapers, or as calendars, would jam the visual *Swadeshi* imagination of Suman, or of Ugra, even as he mobilized the image-repertoires of his story characters, sunk as they were in looking at themselves in the mirrors, going to the cinema all decked up, wearing tight, silk *churidar* payjamas, looking after one's skin and hands, and sporting fabrics infinitely softer than the *khaadi* associated with Gandhian nationalism. Excess as an entire prospectus of imperial products, each triggering the use of the other, each making space for the other. In Ugra's scheme alcohol and boys and chocolate were all part of the same picture, they egged each other on. Historically, it is quite ironic then, that one of the major reasons why the Englishman John Cadbury, the founder of Cadbury chocolates, who was a Quaker, went into the business of tea, coffee and chocolate was because he wanted to drive working people away from alcohol. He had lofty beliefs in and was active in the nineteenth century Temperance movement in England. 'He felt alcohol was a major cause of poverty and other ills among working people. He saw cocoa and chocolate as an alternative to alcohol' (Samuel: 2000). In fact, the whole of the dream factory town that his sons set up in Bournville near Birmingham for their growing business, true to their Quaker beliefs, did not have a single pub (Bryson and Lowe: 2002, Samuel: 2000). By the time, this same chocolate reached the young nationalist Ugra in the colony though, its symbolism, its uses, its family of associations and effects had turned into something else all together, something more 'corrupting', more 'addictive', an object of bad habits.

quite useless to the project of building ideal men for fighting for and running the ('nation') (see Ugra; 1928: appendix 3), for the training as the future 'शासनके सूत्रधार,' 'the architects of governance' (*ibid.* 'Explanation': ' '). Chughtai uses a Marathi word to describe their demeanor, *fatkal*, which implies someone 'without control or composure' (D'Penha; prsnl email: Aug, 2010), close to the Hindi *munhfat*, 'someone who speaks rather freely' (Dalwai; prsnl email: Aug, 2010). 'Typically,' it would refer 'to someone who cannot control his or her tongue, so *tondacha fatkal*' would mean 'someone who has a loose tongue. But it can also refer to *hathacha fatkal*, i.e. someone with a loose fist, given to beating people up' (*ibid.*). Within such a backdrop of degeneracy, finery and excess, Munne Miyan's and Pyare Miyan's lack of relish for women is a positively banal fact, if not actively constitutive of their persona:

[ ] दो जुड़वाँ साहबज़ादे अलीगढ़ भेजे गए थे ... इकों की सोहबत में नाच-गाने के जलसों में  
 [ ] बड़ी पाबन्दी से शरीक होते... -लिखने का कोई प्रोग्राम न था . ये लड़के एक शानदार कोठी में  
 अपने अमले के साथ बस हुल्लड़ मचाया करते नवाब साहब ने जबरदस्त अतिया यूनीवर्सिटी के  
 ...जाजेंट के , , चुस्त पाजामे और कामदार जूते पहने  
 क्लास में कभी ठुमकते आ उनके साथ साज़िंदे भी क्वाटसे में रहते थे -गाने का प्रोग्राम  
 यूनीवर्सिटी के निकम्मे और चापलूसी में माहिर उनकी दरबारी पर ...  
 ['fatkal'] किस्म के थे औरतों से कतई दिलचस्पी न

('[Nawab's] twin heirs were sent to Aligarh...In the company of those boys [Shameem] used to regularly take part in the song and dance gatherings...there was no plan to study. These boys lived in a magnificent mansion with their staff and caused a lot of uproar all the time. Nawab Sahab had given a huge grant to the university. These spoiled ones...used to sometimes sway into the class wearing georgette kurtas with golden

handiwork, silky hugging pajamas and stylish shoes. Their crew used to stay with them in their quarters. There they kept up daily routine of singing and dancing. All the fools and the sycophants of the university used to hang around their mansion...the twins were of the fatkal sort. They had no interest in women. They used to dress up a lot and apply a lot of make-up.' (Chughtai; *ibid.* 165-6)

#### **(iv) (*Launde*)*Baazi* as a Political Metaphor**

The idiom of *baazi* is implicated in the political order of relations. The very language of *baazi* is a dimension of the organization of political relations between men, and between men and women. *Baazi* is one of the ways in which these political relations are worked out. The idiom is a crucial hermeneutic of the very method that structures politics in late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial India and arguably in the more recent post-independence period. Historical signs of transformations or crises in the way 'politics' or 'administration' was carried out, or was aimed to be carried out, would correspondingly modify the social life of *baazi*.

The 'dissolute' world of Munne Miyan and Pyare Miyan is propped up precisely by the grant that their father, the Nawab of Javra, has made to the Aligarh Muslim University exchequer. The 'dubious' activities of the two sons become feasible in the pool of the Nawab's nepotistic influence, connections and money, which is duplicated in the minor networks of his sons' own 'staff' and 'crew' (*ibid.*). Their youthful decadence is hooked onto this political framework of asymmetrical relations, a framework to which the 'all the fools and the sycophants of the university' want to get beneficially attached. It begs to be argued that the idiom of *baazi* is an idiom which is implicit in this particular feudalistic political framework, a framework which the formative moments of modern representative democracies always cast as their murky

prehistory, understanding them as the constant and frustrating insistence of the ‘backward,’ ‘reactionary’ and the ‘feudal’ within the ‘modern,’ ‘progressive’ and the ‘democratic’. A stubborn and confusing coexistence of different political orders is aimed to be wiped out, at least in perception, by what is at base a chronological conceit implicit in idea of ‘progress’ (तर्क tarraqqi, प्रगति pragati) that propelled almost the entire late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century genres of literary, political and social reform; ‘[t]he past clings on to us still in some measure and we have to do much before we redeem the pledges we have so often taken’ (Nehru: 1947). What is this framework that organizes and shelters the world of *baazi* and is unhinged in that contemporary moment of reformist and democratic overhaul, an overhaul that never fully comes about? It is the various scaffolding of political relations that are cast in the phrases such as ‘the paternalism of traditional Indian models of authority’ (Khilnani; 2002: 2), ‘the “old world” of the nineteenth century’ (Steele; 1981: 2), the ‘inequality of opportunity’ (Nehru *ibid.*), ‘the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands [literature has]...degenerated’ (Progressive Writers’ Association manifesto; 1936) or the ‘forces and...ideas that did not care too much about the niceties of parliamentary politics’ (Chatterjee; 2004: 48).<sup>25</sup> *Baazi* is an

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<sup>25</sup> Among the ‘theoretical “theocratic” materials’ produced by the Progressive Writers Association in the 1930s/40s India, Geeta Patel finds Akhtar Husain Raipuri’s ‘Adab aur zindagi’ (‘Literature and Life’) to be a ‘highlight’ (2001: 113). To write his ‘(hi)story of literature’, Raipuri was deeply interested in defining ‘three temporal spaces’, in defining a version of the ‘past’ against which the social-literary activity and ideals of the present and the future could be fashioned (115). For Raipuri, Patel outlines, ‘[t]he past was feudal, a time of Oriental despotism, its ornamental poetry funded by a royal, moneyed elite’, the present was capitalist and its literature satisfied the middle classes, and the future was utopian and egalitarian where literature was produced without constraints, in a classless society (115-6). Generally, in her chapter ‘The Terms of the Encounter: Miraji and the Progressive Writers’ Association’, Patel argues that the Progressives, in proposing a call for literature as ‘social action’, offered a ‘univocal system’ for deciding what was ‘good’/‘bad’ or ‘political’/‘apolitical’ writing (82-128,

implicit part of the fabric of political relations that can be very loosely called 'feudal'. It changes when such relations themselves are transformed, even renewed, by different political orders. It also becomes the marker of the very resoluteness of the 'feudal' – as politics, as language, as a scene – within the 'democratic' and the 'new'. It marks the very intractability of the 'feudal' structures that permeate and work between the lines of the democratic manifestoes. Most significantly, *since baazi is an idiom, a vocabulary, it travels well*. It can unhinge itself from the feudal framework and appear as a language used by characters in varied political settings.

In 1879, the Urdu poet and critic Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) finished and published his poem *Musaddas e-Madd o-Jazr e-Islam* ('An elegiac poem on the Ebb and Tide of Islam') which he had been writing ever since the mid-1870s in Lahore and Delhi. Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-98), the leader of the Aligarh movement for social and educational reform among the Muslims in late 19<sup>th</sup> century India, found the employment of his reformist ideals so perfectly executed in the language and aim of Hali's poem that he asserted 'without a doubt, [that] I was the incentive of this' poem and wrote of it as his own 'greatest work, so that when God asks me what I have done, I will answer that I caused Hali to write the *Mussadas*, and nothing more (need I say)' (quoted in Steele: 13).

Hali's *Mussadas* was in 'clear,' 'virtuous' and 'fluent' verse a history of the fate of Islam, a history that framed its telling through the powerful rhetorical categories of 'rise' and 'fall' of a religious community and thus vindicated a program for contemporaneous reformist change

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390). Often, she writes, and this is crucial for my own discussion, '[t]he charges leveled by the PWA against bad literature...were, among others, directed at the particular ways in which "sexuality" was explored by certain authors like Miraji, Ismat Chughtai, and Manto' (103). The temporal conceit of 'progress', defined by this literary movement, often meant leaving the so-called 'deviant', 'excessive', 'obscene' or 'abnormal' (mostly terms of colonial law and medicine) versions of 'sexuality' behind (103).



championed by his friend and mentor Syed Ahmed Khan (*ibid.*). The literary form and political aims of *Musaddas* were to find an exhaustive theoretical elaboration in Hali's own critical manifesto *Muqaddamah-i Shi'r-o-Sha'iri* ('The Trial of Poetry') published fourteen years later in 1893 (Steele; 1981: 13).

Hali had begun rigorously conceptualizing and writing his *Muqaddamah* as early as the early-1880s, and in year 1882, he wrote in a letter that he was writing 'an extensive essay on the poetry of Muslims, in which [he would]... write about the true situation of Urdu poetry' (quoted in *ibid.* 16). In the same letter he articulated the purpose of literary reform in ambitious artistic and political terms, saying that 'the goal of this work is to point out ways of reforming Urdu poetry, which has become very bad and noxious, and to make apparent the extent to which poetry can be useful to the nation and to art, if it is based on high principles' (*ibid.*). True to his literary project, Altaf Hussain had changed his nom-de-plume from *Xastah* which implied 'wounded' or 'exhausted' to 'Hali' which meant 'modern' or 'new,' a change that was colossal in its significance, for it signaled an overhauling of an entire *way of life* and of the artist's image of himself in it.

Hali lashes out at world of the Urdu *ghazal* with its erotic themes of cruel unrequiting beloveds and sighing, pitiful lovers, themes which he newly frames within the contemporary reformist vocabulary as decadent, petrified and narrow-minded (*ibid.* 16). He likens the enervation of the subject-matter of the Urdu verse to bones that have been sucked dry (*ibid.* 26). The nebulous world which is the target of Hali's official criticism is precisely the world of *baazi*, a world that fed off the legendary scenes of the Urdu *ghazal* and was itself cited in it. A world that held together and made possible, for instance, the eroticism and the practices of Ugra's protagonists

in *Chaklet*, supplying them with the apposite means, the glossary and the fitting atmosphere. This world's characteristic traits, of excess, of performance and of vivid habits, are aimed to be shorn off when Hali newly arranges it within the generic didacticism of a manifesto, now finding the arrow-like glance, the hair-thin waist, the cypress-like body, the almond-like eyes, the ruby-like lips, the hunter-like beloved and the prey-like lover of the Urdu *ghazal* enormously nauseating (*ibid.* 32). The mis-en-scene of *baazi* is under crisis due to what Hali terms 'a great revolution in the thinking of Muslims,' (quoted in *ibid.* 11) inspired by publications such as Syed Ahmed's Aligarh-based *Tahzib Al-Axlaq* ('Social Reformer', first issue 1870), which contemptibly viewed '[t]he old styles of Urdu and Persian composition' as 'frivolous' (*ibid.*) and as obstructions to the *tarraqqi* ('progress') of the Indian Muslims.

It is not incidental that Hali articulates his agenda for literary reform in explicitly political terms. He envisions the changed world of verse and subject-matter as emerging necessarily from a changed nature of political relationships between men. The strategy to exorcise the excess within the male poets and amend the classic themes of the 'erotic' and the 'eulogistic' (see *ibid.* 32) is offered unambiguously as a historical road-map towards a different political formation. The figure of the *baaz* finds sustenance in a particular feudalistic political climate which supplies the means and objects for his habits and a fitting venue for his indulgences; a change in this political climate will affect the very conditions that make such a figure probable.

Hali stretches his reformist history of verse between the over-polarized political formations of 'monarchy' and the 'republic' (*ibid.* 25). The monarch's court, Hali asserts, organizes the entire vocation of the poet in such a way that all his verse is laid at the service of the king, using an array of excessive metaphors of praise and images that resound with flattery and submission.

The court, a tiered political space which institutes heavily imbalanced relationships between men, favors an aesthetic of excess and exaltation, based on an acute dependence of the poet on the favours of his regal patron (*ibid.*). ‘Ubaid Zakani [Persian poet, d. 1370],’ Hali writes, ‘in spite of being a learned man, spent his entire life as a jester because of the king’s like of jesting. In court, free speech is transformed into flattery’ (quoted in *ibid.*, sic). The regal court is a web of exceptionally tiered relationships that operate around several specific centers of authority, with only the chief one being that of the king. It is a cluster of densely auratic relationships between officials demanding elaborate symbolic protocols of respect and favours, obedience and rewards. The aura into which these symbolic gestures feed always concentrates on some figures more than others, thus securing the conventional disparity of any exchange between them.

The Nawab of Javra, mentioned earlier, was the one-time employer of Chughtai’s two brothers and her after her B.A. in Lucknow. He was at the centre of such a ‘feudal’ web of disparate relationships, albeit a web that was, in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century India, historically poised on the verge of transforming; ‘ਭਾਏ ਸੇ’ ([a]lthough he was a *small* Nawab...) (Chughtai; *ibid.* 164, emphasis mine). His authority over his *riyasat* (estate, dominion), which was worth eighteen lakh rupees annually and of which he spent the majority on himself and his family’s well-being, was enacted by an entire template of conventional gestures (*ibid.* 164-5), the likes of which are targeted in Hali’s manifesto and are seen as triggers of literary decadence and corrupt morality, as obstructions to real progress of a community.

Chughtai’s elder brother Azeem Bhai, aka Munne bhai, worked on the Nawab’s estate and had by his influence got his younger brother Nanhe bhai appointed in the position of the estate’s

revenue secretary; ‘

न जाने क्या जोड़-

यह साबित कर दिया गया था की नवाब साहब से हमारा नाँव रिश्ता निकल ,

(‘Azeem bhai was always in the good books of the Nawab of Javra. By some complicated permutation and combination, it had somehow been established that we had a blood relationship with the Nawab on our maternal side’) (164). Nanhe bhai, once he got appointed as the revenue-secretary, however, refused to act out the conventions that propped up this net of hierarchical relationships in the Nawab’s estate. Already in Chughtai’s memoir, the ‘feudal’ is reduced to a catalogue of gestures, into a language that is beginning to float above political contexts that work differently on ground - the ‘feudal’ as half-nostalgic, as a set of unhinged behaviours and words, as something that works in belatedness and irony. The passage in Chughtai where Nanhe’s irreverence is recounted is a testimony to the historical fact of the local crises of the ‘feudal’ or princely framework of politics in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India. The very fact that this passage can take the form of a comedy of errors, as it does in Chughtai, is evidence to the modern disenchantment of the aura of the ‘feudal’ network of relations, a network which I am arguing, was the expressive venue of the idiom of *baazi*:

‘...मुन्ने भाई ने शिकायत की नन्हे भाई को इतना अच्छा ओहदा मिला है मगर सब दे रहे हैं! सबसे पहले तो हस्ब-कायदा तीन बार झुककर सलाम करने पर अड़ गए। बहुत समझाया कि भाई, कुछ कायदे हैं, वो तुम्हारे लिए कैसे बदले जा सकते ...जब दरबार में हाज़िर हुए तो ऊंची आवाज़ से अस्सलाम-अलैकुम कहा और इससे पहले की नवाब साहब बैठने की ,

-सलाम कहना पड़ा और बैठने का हुक्म भी बाद में ही दे पाए क्योंकि वह बैठ चुके थे और वह भी टांग पर टांग रखकर बेतकल्लुफी से हा -आदत घुटना हिला रहे थे। दरबार में सन्नाटा ।

...’ (‘...Munne bhai had complained. Nanhe bhai has got such a good position but he is spoiling everything!

First of all, he was stubborn about the custom of bowing three times and salaaming the Nawab. We explained a lot to him, listen, there are some conventions in the court, how can they be changed for you alone...but when he arrived at the court, he stridently said his assalaam-valekum and before the Nawab sahib could give him the consent to sit, he sat down. Constrained like this, the Nawab sahib had to say valekum-salaam and could give his permission only after Nanhe bhai had already sat down, and that too very casually, one leg over the other, shaking his knee, as was his habit. There was a hush in the entire court...') (*ibid.*)

In his *Muqaddamah*, Hali favored the political structure of the 'republic' because, as in Steele's paraphrase of Hali's account, 'in a monarchy, the poet is forced to bow to the whims of the court to such a degree that his true emotions and real thoughts are gradually ground into the dust and he becomes a slave to the court', 'crying like a beggar at the door of greed and lust' (paraphrase in Steele: *ibid.*). 'In a republic,' on the other hand, Hali argued, theoretically and idealistically, that 'the poet can make great progress... [t]he government does not honor him nor help him and the poet that writes with greatest freedom is popular, not the poet who is under the protection of the king, and is afraid of his anger' (paraphrase in *ibid.*). The political setting of a monarchy, Hali implies, gives full reign to the habitual inclinations, the *shauk* of the 'king, upon whose behavior there are no checks' (*ibid.*). The validation of this culture of 'habits,' *shauk* or 'रुझान' ('rujhaan,' implying 'inclination') whether for dancing, alcohol or boys, radiates from the several centers of authority which duplicate and extend themselves in inconsistent but effective patterns of connections and influence.

Chughtai's family's wish to establish a blood relationship, however tenuous, with the Nawab is precisely the wish to enter these patterns of connections and influence. In her autobiography, this 'influence' appears frequently as ' ' (*rasookh*) and is invariably seen as invested in the male figures, usually bureaucrats, nawabs, politicians, judges, writers or elder brothers.

Recounting her childhood days in the princely state of Jodhpur in the early years of the twentieth century, where her father worked as a civil servant for the maharaja, Chughtai frames that world and its frequent excesses within a very specific historical tussle of dissimilar political orders – one which espoused a parliamentary, representational form, and was seen to be in apparent ascendancy, the politics of the Indian National Congress (estbd. 1885), and another political formation which was notionally centered around a sovereign king, and was undergoing a period of upheaval, the regional princely states:

‘कांग्रेस का ज़ोर दिन-ब-दिन बढ़ रहा था मगर रियासतों में गांधीजी का नाम भी गुनाह समझा जाता महाराजा जोधपुर की रियासत थी, उनकी सखावत के बलबूते पर चल रहे थे पिछले नवंबर में राज कुँवर की सालगिरह हर शहर में बड़ी धूमधाम से मनाई : अब्बा मियां ने भी जशन और चिरागां का इंतज़ा किया रात भर बाहर से आये हुए नक्कालों और रंडियों का नाच होता रहा हम सबने कचहरी की छत से देखा था सारी रात’ (‘The influence of the Congress was increasing day by day but in the princely states, the very name of Gandhiji was a crime. We were the subjects of the maharaja of Jodhpur, we were surviving by his favours and kindness. Last November, the birthday of the royal prince was celebrated with much fanfare in every city. Abba [‘father’] miyan also organized festivities and lights. Throughout the night, the dancing-girls and the mimickers kept up their dance. All of us saw this all night from the roof of the court’ (Chughtai; *ibid.*: 113)

C.M. Naim (b. 1936) makes an argument which is specifically about the consonance of the world of *baazi* with a feudal political order. Writing about the ‘pre-modern Urdu poetry’ of Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810), Shah Mubarak Abru (1683/4-1734) and Ghalib (1797-1869), among others, he argues that ‘the Indo-Muslim milieu of the eighteenth-century Delhi...tolerated homosexuality and did not stigmatize a person merely for his sexual-orientation - so long as that person fulfilled the more important demands of the society, namely an acceptance of, and submission to, its socio-economic hierarchies, and a willingness to perpetuate the same in some measure’ (2004: 19, 39-40). Naim uses a deeply anachronistic vocabulary – *homosexual*,

*sexual-orientation* – but his main suggestion stands: that desire between men and boys, the knack for *laundebaazi*, is articulated precisely in its latent compatibility with the contemporary register of political relations in 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century North India. The Urdu public milieu, Naim contends, showed a ‘state of *indifference*’ (19, italics in original) or, using Samuel Z. Klausner’s phrase, of a ‘tolerant jocularity’ (20) towards the literary expressions and incidences of desire between men and boys. The poet’s own relations and the content of his poetry could substantiate many forms of male desire in so far as it did not violate a reigning political symbolism. Naim writes, a little formulaically perhaps, that the main expressive strand of ‘[h]omosexual passion in the pre-modern Urdu ghazal remained pederastic - i.e. hierarchical, non-mutual, and controlling - because the milieu’s dominant values were of the same nature’ (40).

Such a congruity is evidenced in the fact that the convoluted and the usually favoritist relationships within the political ranks could themselves be expressed using a glossary of male-male desire. Where male-male sex provides an organizing metaphor for political ranks. In 1927, when Ramnath Lal Suman, Ugra’s close friend, laments the lack of strong initiative within the *sarkar*, the government, for the reformist task of eradicating *chaklet-panthi* – this ‘disease worse than leprosy’ or ‘these type of evils which are spread in the schools’ – he satirizes the very bonds between politicians as an elaborate pecking-order of *laundebaazi*:

‘आश्चर्यकी बात है की जब सभी प्रान्तोंके । -विभाग भारतीयोंवे आ गए हैं, इधर प्रांतीय सरकारोंका ध्यान आकर्षित नहीं कि . काउन्सिलके बेचारे ‘देशभक्तों’ को इतनी फुसेत कहाँ की अपने घरके बच्चोंकी ओर गे ! उन्हें तो नेतापनने खुद अपः ’ ’ ’ (‘The surprising thing is that even when the education departments of all the states have come into the hands of the Indians, no one attracts the attention of the State governments towards this. The piteous ‘patriots’ of these councils do not

have enough leisure to pay heed to their children in their own homes! They themselves have been made 'chaklet' by all this business of politics') (Suman: *ibid.* 56-7)

Here in Suman's theatrical language, *laundebaazi* retains its role as a hermeneutic of a 'wasteful,' quasi-feudal political order, where the political web, thick with unequal relationships, enervating corruption and power-camps, constantly undermines the promise of efficient and impartial governance. Suman is, after all, offering *laundebaazi* as a viable issue in need of urgent political rallying to a political system that is itself, as he satirically notes, structured by the guiding conceit of *laundebaazi*.

Even Ugra, as he states in the prefatory *kaifiyat* ('explanation') to his collection, had offered those short-stories as a corrective for male figures around whom social and political respectability usually concentrates: '...समाज के शिक्षालयो, -सस्थाओके देवताओ के 'इयूट' 'पर नियुक्त ' ' मनुष्य'...दूसरो को उपदेश देनेवाले...आदश का नाम लेकर, प्रथा को दोहाड़े

...गभीरताके कठ और स्वरसे बोलने वाले महाशय' ('those 'weak' human-beings who are appointed in the educational institutions or in the agencies for our God-like children...those who preach others.....those who speak in the name of principles and those who cite tradition...those gentlemen who speak seriously...') (Ugra; 1927 (1953): कैफ़ियत ). Suman's use of 'chaklet-panthi' or 'launde-baazi' makes explicit its consistently active role as a political metaphor, as can be seen more recently in the genre of the Hindi and Urdu satire and political reportage and pornography (Cohen; 1995, 2002). *Laundebaazi* has had an exciting history of being a descriptor, a structure, a metaphor to the political in North India, where the aura of sovereignty and of all-exculpating power always resides in some figures more than others.



#### **(v) The Contemporaneity of *Baazi***

In the year 1997, the Berkeley anthropologist Lawrence Cohen was in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) in North India trying to find more details about the murder of Frederick Gomes, an Anglo-Indian Physical Education instructor and assistant warden at the La Martiniere Boys College, which had taken place on 7<sup>th</sup> March earlier that year. The thirty-one year old bachelor was gunned down by a .763 Mauser and a .380 pistol early in the morning by two assailants from the back window of his room in his school bungalow (Bahal: Mar, 1997). Local investigations by the police and journalists had opened up a grisly web of political patronages, mafia money, heroin trade, small town gangsters, gun toting fifteen year old Martinians and bureaucratic families wielding influence to hush the matter up (Bahal *ibid.*, Pandey: Jul, 2008, Cohen: 2002). As a twelve year old that year, studying in grade 7<sup>th</sup> in the same school, I remember that the murder was shrouded by a cryptic silence from the school authorities who had wrapped it in formal morning assembly condolences. Among the day-scholars, all sorts of rumors were rife, and every boarder spoke as if he had some crucial clue to the mystery. Most of us, I remember, were terrified of Gomes, who had recently joined the school, on account of his extreme strictness and the fact that he had the habit of beating up boys black and blue on the slightest of provocation. In the event of his murder, the young students spun elaborate stories of poetic justice that involved acts of 'revenge' by 'wronged' students and of dangerous connections from Malihabad, a small town in the Lucknow district, which even in the filtered down versions of the twelve year olds then was still notorious for its '*dehaati* ('rustic') goondas,' gang networks and oddly enough, delicious *dasher*i mangoes.

Unknown to me then, reports of the incident had been immediately syndicated in all the local newspapers and alumni networks and was to be spoken by the Lucknow press as a 'sensational killing' or a 'much publicized murder' for years after (Pandey *ibid.*; TOI: Dec, 2004). Already the contemporary accounts saw the murder as sully the legacy of the one-fifty-two year old school which as 'many old students and Lucknow observers' had remarked, was being engulfed by a "'precipitation of accumulated weaknesses'" that La Martiniere' had 'gradually allowed itself to slither into' (Bahal: *ibid.*). This 'precipitation of accumulated weaknesses' marked out a dizzyingly complex civics of the region.

All the journalists that Cohen discussed the matter with framed it within the larger story of 'the decline in *political civility* in the state capital,' that is, precisely as a question of an avowedly 'democratic' political structure at odds with its own theories (Cohen; *ibid.* 152, emphasis mine). The journalists' accounts pictured a political setup of Lucknow that was mired in elected politicians with criminal records, the 'noxious creeping' influence of the Purabi (eastern U.P.) and Bihari *zamindars* ('landowners') who were known for an indiscriminate sexual rapacity and feudal manners, of political fates that were sealed and undone by the influence of party oligarchs and of moneyed mafia, and of Pathan moneylenders and agents from Malihabad who were then taking over the heroin trade in the region and moving into the state capital with their 'new money' (*ibid.* 152-3). 'La Martiniere has been affected,' a Lucknow journalist Sharma told Cohen, 'like everything else' (*ibid.*).

Cohen had gone to the Lucknow office of the newspaper *The Pioneer* because his curiosity had been whetted by a news-story that invoked two of the abiding research interests that he has attempted to analytically knit together throughout the substantial period of his career as an

anthropologist: the insistence of the feudal figure of the 'sovereign' in modern Indian politics and the idioms of male-male desire in North India:

'A variety of theories had surfaced to explain the murder: the teacher was a drug dealer, he was a womanizer, he was involved with unsavory elements that were turning the august school into a den of goondas. All of these were summarized in a headline in *The Pioneer*: "Gomes was a gay." Sharma, the journalist who wrote the story, was poking fun at the profusion of rumors, the teacher's being gay was but the latest feeble attempt to write off the crime' (*ibid.* 153)

Cohen's conversation with Sharma, however, newly cast the joke of the headline as one of the many connected and crucial variants of the murder mystery. 'It's Pathans,' he told Cohen, 'from the town of Malihabad' (*ibid.*). The influence of the *Pathans*, or of the Bihari *zamindars*, that was repeatedly cited as the reasons for the deterioration of the parliamentary politics in U.P. linked figures classically associated with the cultures of *baazi*, and *laundebaazi* in particular, to a state of politics that was 'mixed' at best and where most politicians' destinies were decided by their ability to maneuver a baffling world of non-legal enterprises and methods that usually fell off the radar of legislation by the book. In Sharma's version the sexual excess of the *Pathans*, 'staple of the colonial homoerotic', is intimately related to their role as the political entrenched Mafiosi (*ibid.*). '[T]he once pastoralist Pathans like boys; rising 'goondaism' and homosexuality went hand in hand. Malihabad, Ghazipur, much of Bihar – all these Pathan towns are infamous, and their particular proclivity is spreading as local black money and the drug mafia extend their reach' (*ibid.*).

Similarly, in the accounts of most of the Lucknow journalists, the *ayyash* ('hedonist') Bihari *zamindar* 'was marked in his constitution of the sexual object as anything that moved. Women, young men, and the third-gendered *hijras* were all at risk for a hunger framed as sodomitical – *laundebaazi*. History was measured through the corruption of a more courtly sovereignty by

such excess' (*ibid.*). During their meeting at the Pioneer office, Sharma's boss, the editor who had studied sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, interrupted their discussion and whisked away Cohen to give him his explanation of such events and practices:

'Don't listen to him...It has nothing to do with Pathans. It's all about land tenure. Look, I'm from Punjab. We don't have that much homosexuality there. Not in West Bengal, either. But in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the British land settlement produced relations of extreme bondage and dependency between men, and the result was that this kind of behavior became entrenched as part of the local political life' (*ibid.*)

Cohen admits that he was 'intrigued' by the editor's arguments (*ibid.*). It would be crucial to read these editor's comments in terms slightly different from his own. What is offered as a historical etiology of the greater concentration of 'this kind of behavior,' of 'homosexuality,' in some regions (Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh) as compared to others (Punjab, West Bengal) – as if it was really *all* about the land tenure or the lack of it – can be read in other terms. First, as evidence of the fact that, in these regions, the 'extreme bondage and dependency between men,' had historically known to have a sexual dimension whereby Bihari landowners were and are well-known to keep *laundas* – boys and young men for sex, a practice that was concomitant with their persona of political authority and excess (*ibid.*). And second, that the very articulation of this 'local political life' could be done in the terms involving sex between men, whereby male sexual relations acquire the dimensions of an entrenched public political allegory. Political authority could be mobilized in the expressive metaphor of male-male sex. This metaphor is rampant in local circuits of political gossip, in popular terms of abuse, in publications of raunchy political satires like in Benares at the time of the festival of Holi and, though rarely, in local reportage of political events (Cohen: 1995, 2002).

The third reading of the editor's comments is about the continuing relevance of colonial historiography in understanding the contemporary moment in North India, about reading the

‘modern’ without falling prey to chronological conceit of ‘progress’. The present political relations being worked out in the area are evidences of the constant weaving of different political orders, orders that are found to be fundamental to land laws and property laws, to political fates and culture patronage in the colonial *and* the postcolonial histories of the region. This reading insists on the resoluteness of those colonial and ‘pre-modern’ political models, and their characteristic features, which continue to interact with and inform the ‘modern’, ‘democratic’ pact of contemporary Indian politics. Even in understanding the current, local idioms of *laundebaazi*, Cohen realized, one has to necessarily receive them through ‘the interpretive frames that give’ them ‘political force’ and in doing so one is constantly buffeted by ‘the figure of kingship’ – that figure with which democratic theory often establishes an oppositional relationship to arrive at its own definition (*ibid.*).

In telling the story of the failure of the Nehruvian model of ‘developmental planning’ to either administer or even interpret the contemporary Indian city, Ravi Sundaram restages Partha Chatterjee’s argument about the conflict between the ‘civil’ and the ‘political’ society in contemporary India (Chatterjee: 2004; Sundaram: 2010). Elaborating on the example of Delhi’s urbanism since the 80s, Sundaram fleshes out a ‘pirate’ version of ‘modernity,’ one in which the myth of a ‘central’ legislative administration is shorn off to reveal the unwieldy and illicit networks of urban communities whose lives are informed by low cost media, by paralegal surviving tactics and visceral political arrangements that work by *getting around* the governmental Masterplans (Sundaram: 1-27). The ‘modernist planning designs of the 1950s and postcolonial control models of the city now lie in disarray’ in the face of unauthorized

neighborhoods, of political patronages, of squatter camps and of bewildering commercial networks that are yet untamed by the logics of a corporate market (*ibid.*).

Chatterjee had understood the grassroots of Indian politics on at least two lines: one was the 'line connecting civil society to the nation-state founded on popular sovereignty and granting equal rights to citizens' (Chatterjee: *ibid.*: 37). This was the domain where the ideal vision of politics, as articulated by various civil society groups, was framed squarely within the pursuit of legal rights and was mobilized by formal 'petitions' to ministries and courts, recourses that constantly upheld their participation within a liberal citizenship and bolstered the status of the democratic nation-state as the ultimate arbiter of their condition. The other 'line,' however, far more meandering, was the one 'connecting populations to governmental agencies pursuing multiple policies of security and welfare' (*ibid.*). These groups of 'populations,' of the not-yet citizens, enter into a unique cluster of 'political' relationships with the state, relationships that often defy the letter of the constitution. 'Yet these are without doubt political relations that may have acquired, in specific historically defined contexts, a widely recognized systematic character, and perhaps even conventionally recognized ethical norms...' (*ibid.*). Unlike the polite writs and petitions, these relations often mobilize the more disenchanting networks of political favors, unauthorized perks, para-legal strategies, criminal methods and 'informal' circuits of finance to achieve its ends.

Chatterjee stretches back the history of this conflict between 'civil' and 'political' society to precisely the 'history of more than a hundred years of modern representative institutions in India' where 'good nineteenth century liberals' like Naoroji, Gokhale and the younger Jinnah evinced a trust in the 'inherent value' of parliamentary institutions whereas the more

aggressive 'so-called Extremists in nationalist politics,' especially the Khilafat and Noncooperation movements worked along ways that overtly bypassed parliamentary procedures (*ibid.*). Ugra had been the inheritor of this history of conflict of political ideals. To thicken the more recent history of his *old* conflict, Sundaram administers a boost-shot of the technological into Chatterjee's account, whereby he sees this conflict between 'civil' and 'political' society being fought on the stages made available by the recent revolution in media penetration within both the Indian poor and the globalizing elites, the informal 'populations' and the formalized 'citizens.' Both Chatterjee and Sundaram imagine the contemporary as shaped by an assortment of political orders.

The picture that the journalists in Lucknow had painted for Cohen in the 1990s presented a similarly conflicted space where the 'abstract' relationship between an accountable democratic state and its equal citizens was cut across by a far more fleshly relationship between political camps and communities, between mafia finance, vote-bank populations and conventional bonds of political subjugation. The contemporary north-Indian political scene, as crystallized in the accounts that Cohen heard, is buffeted both by the principles of a legal modernity implicit in the idea of the nation-state and by a far more bootlegged modernity that lies outside the 'long' hands of the law. The idioms of same-sex desire, bred as they are in this constant buffeting, duplicate this conflict, become represented through it. Whereas the 'homosexual' has carved a minority niche within representative democratic politics, where classifiably 'different' citizens share a nominal and abstract 'equality,' the *laundebaaz* finds its moorings in the vernacular political cultures of excess, satire, getting-by, entertainment and authority that continue to inform the modern political in India and come to have 'conventionally recognized

ethical norms' of their own (Chatterjee: 37). The *homosexual* and the *laundebaaz* are political creatures in this deep sense of the term.

*Baazi* travels well, we had claimed. And if it travels well it must outstretch the strictly 'feudal' and not make sense only through this particular political lens, in this specific political setup. It must get infused in contexts beyond these.<sup>26</sup> Ugra's characters were after all mostly young teachers and students in urban universities in colonial India, going on to become clerks, teachers and writers. They were not political ministers or princes with vast dominions. *Baazi* or *shauk*, in this sense, has always been a more catholic idiom. Being an idiom, it has travelled well beyond the feudal even as it always continued to cite the feudalness in all its travels. The feudal always remains alluded within *baazi*, remains nominal within it. In the Masood Pervez directed Pakistani Punjabi film *Heer-Ranjha* (1970), after taking a swig of *bhang* (hemp-drink) sitting in the fields, one small rural labourer asks his employer, a small farmer: 'Chacha mainu ai das, ne sadde sharifan nu ai shahi nashe kyon lagge hain...[Uncle, tell me this, how come we simple, respectable people have come to have such royal addictions]'. *Baazi* has always already been touring wide-ranging places, classes and environments. I will end this chapter with a story about how *baazi* works in the post-liberalization India which is informed by an endlessly redistributable media, by economic and migratory opportunities of the free market, by the increased traffic of signs and people between cities and small towns and by a dynamic coexistence of the many idioms of same-sex or opposite-sex desire and excess.

On 18<sup>th</sup> July in 2010, I was flying from New Delhi to Lucknow on a JetLite flight. This was only the second Indian domestic flight that I had ever been able to afford in the 24 years of living

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<sup>26</sup> I want to thank Francesca Orsini for suggesting this idea to me.



there. After three decades of public-sector aviation, government of India had begun to ease restrictions for the private operators by the late eighties and throughout the 90s (Mazumdar: 2008). In this last decade, a deregulated aviation industry has seen many private and public airlines competing for a growing customer base of fliers among the swelling middle-classes in India (Sharma: 2007). The 'low-fare' phenomenon had altered the demography of fliers in big and small Indian cities, no longer limited to the very rich or to the political classes. This meant that a more mixed crowd on planes was possible, as was proximity of dissimilar backgrounds, languages and world-views. Two decades ago, I, being from a 'middle-income' family would have been as unlikely a domestic passenger as the guy who I happened to meet aboard that day. Raj Sharma (name changed) was already sitting on my window seat when I came. He smilingly offered his middle seat which I took. He was wearing a quarter sleeved yellow t-shirt, a light blue pair of jeans and a checkered pink and white hand-band. His loud sun glasses were tucked in his collar and his wavy neck-length black hair had dyed streaks of bronze. He had two cell-phones, one more expensive than the other, which he refused to switch-off during the entire flight, including the take-off and the landing. He spoke mostly in a laid-back Hindi littered with English words and phrases. Raj was more disarming than the slightly tedious twenty-one year old computer engineering student from IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), Kanpur who sat on my right on the aisle seat and who, as I later discovered, was a few batches junior to me in La Martiniere Boys. Whereas conversations with my school-mate lasted a boring few minutes during which he told me how he loves the Vancouver airport and hates London's Heathrow because of its tackiness, my conversations with Raj were not only more exciting but also had a lot to tell me about the current social life of *baazi*.

Raj was 23 and worked as a masseuse in Delhi. When I had responded that I had never been to a 'massage parlour' in Delhi, he quickly corrected me. He did not work in *chote, gande* ('small, dirty') 'parlours' but in 'an Italian company' 'Addiction' which, he said, had many branches in Delhi. It was not a small locally-run tacky business, I was told, but an international company that served only classy hotels and commanded more regard. Gesturing towards a white female tourist sitting behind us, he said that he served only foreign girls like this. '[M]assage karte hain, to phir agar unko sex chahiye hota hai, to phir wo maang lete hain, phir paise ki phikar naheen karte, paanch-saat hazaar tak de dete hain ['I do the massage, then if they need sex, they just ask for it, they do not worry about the money, they give even upto 5-7 thousand rupees']'. Every time he leaves Delhi for a day, he told me, he loses out at least eight to ten thousand of his massage earnings. Pointing out the Indian female aircrew member, who had earlier curtly asked him to switch off his phone, he said that 'yeh toh smell kartee hongii...aisi toh mere paas bahut hain wahan ['this sort must surely smell, I have a whole lot like them in Delhi']'. In the middle of this conversation, I had asked Raj, whether he massaged 'gents' as well. He had looked at me funny and said 'wo shauk mujhe naheen hai ['I do not have that interest']'. His company, he said, had male masseurs for female clients and vice versa. I said that I heard of male masseurs who served male clients and same for women. He did not pick up the hint.

Raj said that he was going to meet his girlfriend in Lucknow who he visits about four times a month. He quickly showed me her photographs on his costlier cell-phone. The girl, he said, was in love with him and had lately been trying to avoid marriage by pretending to limp or stutter in front of boys with whom her family tried to arrange her match. As he rolled from one photo to another on his cell phone, the girl in the pictures did not remain the same. He kept up his

commentary, telling me that he also had 4 to 5 girlfriends in Delhi. From his earnings as a masseuse, he had bought a flat in Pitampura in north-west Delhi and a Hyundai car. Girls flocked to him, he said, while he showed me several pictures of him and them in various states of undress in his flat and in the car. He goes out a lot in Delhi, he said, ‘bahut kharche ho jaate hain Dilli mein, bas club-vab [‘I end up splashing a lot of money in Delhi, just clubs’]’ and went on to mention several discotheques in three or four star Delhi hotels as his favorite haunts. It was in this context of self-avowed excesses that he first brought to work the idiom of *baazi*. Talking of his life in the city, he said, ‘kabhi phone karke aayega to dikhaayenge aapko dilli ki badhiya life, clubs aur *ladkibaazi* [‘if you call me sometime and come, then I will show you the good life in Delhi, clubs and fun with girls’].

Raj had first come to Delhi when he was seven. His parents in his native town Azamgarh in eastern Uttar Pradesh had wanted him to sit in the local general stores to make a small living. He migrated to Delhi instead with a family relative. Now, he told me with an unmistakable pride, that his whole family depended on him. He had singlehandedly arranged the money for the marriage of his five sisters and had bought some land for his family in Azamgarh.<sup>27</sup> His dream, he said, was to return to his native town once in a helicopter so that the social status of his parents would irreversibly shoot up among the entire neighborhood. I asked him about where he got such an idea. He told me that the Bombay cinema superstar ‘Amitabh Bacchan ke paas apna helicopter hai, kuch style hota hai, aur vaise bhi helicopter sabko thodi hi milta hai, sirf

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<sup>27</sup> Raj had asked me about how much I would earn when I would become a teacher at Delhi University after completing my doctoral thesis. I gave him an estimate of anywhere between thirty to forty thousand rupees per month. He looked a little sorry on my behalf and continued with his stories.

kuch military ya government waalon ko, ya koi bahut ameer ho toh [‘Amitabh Bhacchan has his own helicopter, that is some style, and anyway, not everyone can get a helicopter, it is given only to a few in the military and in the government, or if you’re very rich’]. It is in this context of his dreams, now realizable not only through public-sector institutions like the government or the military but also through freely expendable private capital, that Raj used the idiom of *baazi* the second and the last time in our conversations. Talking of the helicopter landing in his native town Azamgarh, he said, ‘isse hamari showbaazi ho jayegi [‘with this, we can show off in a big way’]’. *Showbaazi* – to show off habitually, being addicted to it, to consume while they look.

*Baazi* is used to talk about perceptions of excess, whether it is the promiscuous affairs with girls or whether it is the blatant performance of consumption in one’s social circles. This excess is not premised on some static feudal economic arrangements but instead is driven by the post-liberalization version of the free market with all its staple constituents – advent of international companies, migratory labour force from smaller cities, a more mobile capital and a mounting impetus in the media towards practices of conspicuous consumerism. Raj’s stories however are possible only at the cusp of individual, anonymized freedom in the city and a more embedded, ‘responsible’ social role in the native family town. His tales materialize somewhere in the middle of free expenditure on one’s own person, as individual choice in the free market and primacy of free capital, and a more *foreseen* sort of expenditure on the larger joint family in the home town, as predicated on ideas of domicile, primacy of land and of long-standing family connections. *Baazi* cites this mixed, knotty economy – it is mobilized by its contradictions.

In all these stories, was Raj’s wife. She, I was told, lived in Azamgarh with his family and knew nothing of his girlfriends, his sex work or club outings. He had married when he was nineteen

and she was slightly younger. She rarely goes out of the house, he said, and if she does, she is always accompanied by her brother-in-law and parents. He said that he almost never took her out, ‘bas kabhi-kabhaar mele mein, wo bahut simple hai, shaukeen naheen hai [‘just sometimes for the fair, she is very simple, she is not fond of things, not a dabbler’]. Raj’s stories about *baazi* seemed to be predicated on series of asymmetries between him and his wife – about who is more wont to be excessive in a heavily gendered political economy, who can afford, both socially and financially, to be *shaukeen*, to have colourful habits, and who is more mobile out of the domestic household to lay claim to bigger cities and their new, anonymized freedoms.

*Baazi* accommodates to the demands and conditions of the multifaceted post-liberalization world and its unique inequalities and opportunities. It continues to cite the *feudalness* of its long historical associations but in modified ways. The new rich and the consuming middle-classes are cast as the emergent nobility in the free market, with industrial giants, corporate connected film-stars and airline honchos as their kingpins, regularly making appearances on corporate-owned Hindi and English media channels. This class and its constant televised feting informs Raj’s dreams of helicopters, 4-star clubs, costly mobile-phone, girls and cars, many of which lie within his reach. These join the list of the *shahi nashe*, royal habits. The feudalness of *baazi* is simultaneously sustained and disenchanted by the new ‘gentry’ made possible in transformed economies. As an idiom, it makes space within these new hierarchies and aspirations. As with *gaybaazi* mentioned in the introduction, the register of *baazi* persists, always renovating its references, shifting but consistently embedded within the contemporary.

# चाकलेट

इसमें उग्रजीकी उन कहानियोंका संग्रह है जिन्हें पढ़कर आप कलेजा थामकर रह जायेंगे। समाजके अनुदिन बढ़ते हुए पाप 'लौंडे-बाज़ी' के भयानक परिणामका मर्मभेदी दिग्दर्शन करानेवाली इस पुस्तकमें सफेदपोश नरराक्षसोंके घृणित हथकण्डोंका ऐसा जीता-जागता चित्रण है कि इसे पढ़ लेनेके बाद अबोधसे अबोध बालक भी इन नारकीय जीवोंको देखते ही पहचान जायगा और इनके प्रलोभनोंसे स्वयं बचकर इन पापियोंके दुर्व्यसनोंके कारण सर्व नाशकी ओर अग्रसर होते हुए देशको भी बचानेमें समर्थ हो सकेगा। इस पुस्तककी उपादेयता और आवश्यकताका सबसे बड़ा प्रमाण इसके प्रथम संस्करणका दो महीनेके अल्पकालमें ही समाप्त हो जाना है। बढ़िया मोटे ऐंटिक कागज़पर छपी २१६ पृष्ठोंकी इस पुस्तकका मूल्य केवल प्रचारकी दृष्टिसे १) रखा गया है।

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Fig. 1: Chaklet Advertisement, in Ugra's Dilli ka Dalal, June 1928.



सम्राज्य की इस पुस्तक में हिन्दी जगत में हाहाकार  
मचा रखा है।



इसमें समाज के उस भयानक पाप का वर्णन है जिसका  
घोर घृणा और भय के लोग भी नहीं लेते।

इसमें बड़े मार्मिक ढङ्ग से यह दिखाया गया है कि समाज के  
राक्षस हमारे सुन्दर लड़कों को किस प्रकार 'चाकलेट' या 'पालट'  
या अपनी वासनाओं का शिकार बनाते हैं। इस विषय पर चुप्पी  
लगाने से हमारी वर्तमान पीढ़ी किस तरह नामर्द और जनानी हुई  
जा रही है इसे आप इसमें देख सकेंगे। इस—भारतीय साहि-  
त्य में अद्वितीय—ग्रन्थ को अवश्य देखिये। मूल्य १। रुपया।

आर्डर नीचे लिखे पते पर—

**पता—बोसवों सदी पुस्तकालय,**  
गऊघाट, मिर्जापुर सिटी यू० पी०

Fig. 2: Chaklet Advertisement, in Ugra's Chand Haseenon ke Khutoot, December 1928.

**(i) A Short History of *Planetromeo***

A small part of this story begins in London. In 2002 a young German man comes to stay in the city and, like most urban migrants, tries to find new networks of friends and lovers for some 'good times' and 'high jinks' (see 'About Us'; *PlanetRomeo* (hereafter PR)). He finds that the briskest and the most undemanding way to search for other men 'of his ilk' was the internet (*ibid.*). Soon enough, he sets about trying his glass slipper on every Cinderella in town who's logged in.

A few days into it, however, he faces a problem. He finds that most dating portals, apart from being a great deal unnavigable, weigh heavily on his pockets. He has to shell out a few extra pounds every time to avoid abrupt closure of online chats. By the early years of the last decade, the same time as he began his searches, online dating/romance had already become a big business; U.S. consumers alone were spending close to \$500 million on personals/dating content in 2003, up by nearly fifty percent from the year before (Mapes: 2004).

Our protagonist's problem is not surprising. It is a part of what had already been memoed by Saskia Sassen at the turn of the century, that the internet, in its brief history, has already entered a fourth phase, a phase organized mainly under the sign of e-commerce. Most of the

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<sup>28</sup> All user quotations, unless otherwise mentioned, are from the website [www.planetromeo.com](http://www.planetromeo.com) (PR), accessed between October, 2009 and January, 2010.



internet's backbone softwares are now chiefly linked to billing, identity-verification and trademarks protection (2000: 583).

Our lad's money crunch had given him an idea. Earlier in spring that year, he had already chosen to ride the e-market brainwave and had started a website with a friend/business partner that aimed to relocate a section of the prolific urban escort/client trade from dirty magazines' back pages on to the web. This was done by the name of Erados.com (now fully integrated into PR). Cobbling together the programme codes from this website, Jens and Manuel sprung the first version of 'GayRomeo', a 'gay' dating website, onto the internet by the October of that year (*ibid.*). Before the year had ended, 'the good old gay grapevine' had worked and there were already 3000 free registered users (*ibid.*).

Over the next few years the website moved its offices from London to a little room in a backyard of a building in Friedrichshain in Berlin and to more roomy quarters in the 'wild, wild' east side of the city by 2004 (*ibid.*). By the means of a chargeable Plus account, over and above the usual free user account, money had begun to flow in and the website, now a limited company, grew both in numbers and web reach. However, the strict provisions of the German Act for the Protection of Young Persons and Minors, which effectively required that every user be personally verified through rigorous identificatory softwares like PostIdent or Schufa (the German credit protection agency) meant that either *GayRomeo* had to close shop or remove all its users' 'hardcore' photos. This personalized checking was both expensive and complicated. The company chose a third option and, in the summer of 2006, happily exiled itself to Amsterdam where the courts were lax.

In March 2009, by when *GayRomeo* (also by then, called *Planetromeo*) had more than 900,000 profiles from just about every country on the planet, it chose the familiar corporate strategy of merger to expand its business. Merging *guys4men* that was already popular in Asia and America, with PR that hoarded most of the European 'gay internet sector' (PlanetRomeoBlog: 2009), meant that it became the biggest portal online for men seeking out other men for friendship, sex or romance (see Fig. 3).

As of the beginning of 2010 there were about fifty thousand Indian user profiles hosted on the website. This short history of PR – that travels haphazardly from the lonely hearts in the London suburbia to east side Berlin, to the Dutch capital, while it keeps on exploding onto the thousands of computer screens around the world, including South Asia – is already a deeply transnational one. It sets the stage for the idiom of a worldwide 'genuine gay community' (PR) that the PR team constantly uses in its publicity material, and for the heavily globalized references that frame most of its user profiles. It is not surprising to find photographs of Brad Pitt, Backstreet Boys or Daniel Radcliffe used as profile pictures by people in Raipur or Meerut in India, references to the San Francisco 'bondage scene' or the Chilean Pokemon subcultures among Kolkata users, or citations from Ghalib and Robert Frost and Timberlake or Sultanpuri jostling with each other in the same profile. PR, like most of the internet, is a relentlessly impure space that quotes too many and too much at the same time.

## **(ii) The Internet as Form**

The internet produces a peculiar analytic problem and this is best understood as the problem of form. In a time when almost all our conversations – be it of business, love or information searches – have at least partially been uploaded onto the internet, it, in turn, returns our gesture by resuscitating this old and creative problem.

This is interesting because the internet activates not few but all the features of form. Not only form as structural map and as manner of arrangement (such as in *the form of a building* or *the form of the dialogue*) but also its visual sense (*his masculine form*), its evaluative mode (*the violinist at the top of her form*), its taxonomic turn (*forms of plant life*, or *poetry as a literary form*) and its tardier prescriptive logics (*things can be said in bad form*). The form, then, on the internet, as elsewhere, is at once a blueprint, a category, a command, a shape and a scene. It is the necessary dimension of recognisability. I will highlight the problem of the internet *as* form by involving two situations. This conversation is central to our understanding of same-sex intimacy on the internet in general, and on *PR* in particular.

The first situation is on television. Graham Linehan wrote a sitcom series *The IT Crowd* that has been running on the British Channel 4 since November, 2006. The show is set in the corporate office of one Reynholm Industries in London. The characters, Moss and Roy, are the new age trouble-shooters of this world – the corporate office, an institution which is almost entirely sustained on computer networks.

The IT department guys are the ones which convert the *mysterious* world of microchips and servers, hard-drives and softwares into the more familiar series of screens that we easily manoeuvre. I use *mystery* here precisely in its theological sense of *secret rites*, a religious truth known or understood only by divine revelation, a doctrine of faith which the human reason is

generally unable to fathom. Whenever we are on the computer, whether online or offline, we handle only an interconnected sequence of surfaces. The orchestration of these surfaces is a necessarily more complex process whose form is a subject of special knowledge, province of a separate official department i.e. it constitutes, in modern terms, an *expertise*.

Jen – a downright computer illiterate – joins this department by fluke as its manager. Moss and Roy do not take well to new found authority. To make matters worse, Jen soon wins the employee of the month. Moss and Roy, the half-acknowledged priests of the IT, decide on a prank as revenge. Suggesting material for her acceptance speech – which is supposed to draw on her department’s expertise – they decide to play on her ignorance. They lend her a small rectangular black box with a tiny blinking red bulb. This, they tell Jen, is the internet.

‘Moss (pointing to the box): This, Jen, is the internet.

Jen: What?

Moss: That’s right.

Jen (uncertain): This is the internet. (Moss nods) The whole internet?

Moss (assertively): Yup. I asked for a loan of it so that you could use it in your speech.

Jen (surprised, admiringly): So small.

Moss: That’s one of the surprising things about it.

Jen (sceptic): Hang on, it doesn’t have any wires or anything.

Moss (knowingly): It’s wireless.

Jen (stands corrected): Oh yes, everything is wireless nowadays isn’t it. So I can really use it in my speech.

What if someone needs it?

Moss: Oh no no, people will still be able to go online and everything, it will still work.

Jen: Oh good, good.

Moss: I tell you, you present this to the shareholders and you’ll get quite a response.

Jen (curious): Can I touch it? (Moss give a go ahead)

Jen (hesitantly, with awe, weighing the box in the air): Oh, so light!

Moss: Of course it is Jen, the internet doesn’t weigh anything.

Jen (laughs artificially, pretends familiarity): Ha ha, no of course, it doesn’t. Ha ha’ (Linehan, Graham, *The IT Crowd*, Series 3, Episode 4, 2008)

The understandings of internet vacillate between the extremes of form and formlessness. This is the condition of the possibility of Moss's joke and of the relative unknowingness of Jen. The internet has a dual status. It is a patchwork of simple screens but it is also an elaborate state of connection of user-end machines, of weightless signals travelling at a speed, of physically located servers that can be touched, and of programming codes and hardware equipment managing these many situations of connection. It is at once a basic webpage and a 'dynamic condition' (Sassen; 2000: 590), 'a decentralized network of networks' (*ibid.* 583).

It is evocative of secret cult rites; in the same episode Roy refers to 'the elders of the Internet' and to Stephen Hawking, the theoretical physicist, as this cult's chief 'the hawk'. The usual location of the little black box, Jen is told, is the top of the Big Ben, a location that has all the trappings of the religious sublime i.e. it is seen by all, but at a distance.

Moreover, the architecture of the internet, in Sassen's pithy definition – *a decentralized network of networks*, a definition which theoretically approaches the infinite – is formally reminiscent of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's diagram of how language insists itself in the unconscious: '...rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings' (Lacan; 1966: 169). Both – the conceit of religion or of pagan cults and of the psychoanalytic unconscious – are explanatory conceits to make sense of the differing levels of the general unknowability of the form of the internet.

These conceits dance around the simultaneous place and placelessness of the internet. It both satiates our visual and haptic senses and also withdraws from it. Later in this chapter, when we will try to understand the many ways in which intimacy is carried out online, and the forms in which people present themselves as initiators and receivers of this intimacy – this

discussion about the formal problem that is the internet, will yield its centrality. Specific forms of desire and love will only be actualized and mediated, aided and piqued by this formal problematic of the internet.

The second situation is central to modern life: the filling up of official forms. If there is a single document that can lay claim to be a unit of the modern *zeitgeist* then it is the extremely recognizable and formulary document with blanks for insertion of particulars. Modern existence is an interminable series of filling up of forms; we encounter it frequently and ubiquitously. The form becomes both the description and the evidence of secular individual life. Organizations confer membership through registration, nations confer citizenship through passport-offices, and websites confer services through the customary sign-up. Our birth, education, work, aspirations, love and death are all, at least theoretically, possible subjects to be filled up in a form. All these events – of birth, death, school-tenure, relationships *et. al.* – in turn seemingly become the vital and valid categories of the self. They become the ways in which the self is said to be realized.

The form does not simply register a field, like date of birth or nationality, it bestows it with significance, gives it power to explain. The contemporary world of online love and sex is similarly populated with such documents; it is populated *through* such documents. The online registration forms on networking websites become obligatory gateways for their full access and their functioning.

PR – the networking website for men that will form the central example for the discussions in this chapter – asks its users to fill up a registration form that asks for a range of details such as their body-type and ethnicity, their eye-colour and dick-size, their ‘orientation’ and preferred

sexual position. A form always has the fields of information that are considered vital in understanding a person in a given situation, and its filled content is at least provisionally assumed to be valid. That is, a form is primarily a document of comprehension based on trust. It is a bid to understand that is always also a bid to verify.

The fields of information in the form become the nominal, situational dimensions of the self. In this sense, the form is a self-reflexive document. It is an exercise in proxy making, to create a version that can stand in for you - your user-profile. It makes you halt and consider your experiences, bodies, behaviours and emotions in terms of an always limited set of given fields. '[t]he self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future. It is a project carried on amid a profusion of reflexive resources...' (Giddens; 1992: 30) The official form – the central reflexive resource for the modern self – is both the homonym and the central example of the concept of form. This document – the form to be filled up – lays claim to its namesake concept in the purest sense, being constituted as it is only by blanks, by frames and structures, while being notionally empty of content itself.

However, in posing as the device of innocent knowledge collection, the form becomes the most creative site of production and shaping of knowledge, that is, the form is always already a prefiguring of its content. The field to be filled up will always inform what can be and is actually filled up.

This would be done in the most literal sense by the device of the drop-down menu which lists an always limited series of options; for e.g., for body-type it is *slim, average, athletic, muscular, belly, stocky*, for dick-size it is S, M, L, XL, XXL, for 'orientation' it is *gay, bisexual, transgender*. The fields of information are never purely empty, they peg themselves onto putative norms, on

what is generally acceptable as *average*. This *average* or *medium (M)* is a dubious loan word from statistics. In choosing what best defines him, the person is invited into a world where he is to place himself in comparison to a wider lot, wondering about what generally and recognisably counts as *slim* and what as *stocky*. He is to cull out an individual point by the aid of that social science of the collective, that is, statistics. All the people are to be imaginatively slotted on a scale, extremes are to be thought up and averages devised.

The figure of the *average*, which is a statistical category, is never explicitly spoken of as the figure of the *acceptable*, which is a social and moral category, but it invokes the same structures and hierarchies that are so integral in precipitating moral decisions. For instance, the PR registration form gives a range of five check-boxes, any of which can be suitably ticked, between the categorical extremes of 'Home Boy' and 'Party Animal' to plot one's individual 'Night life' or between 'Creative Chaos' and 'Pedantic' for giving a sense of individual 'Tidiness'. These statistical categories are not prior to the moral question. They are not socially naive. They activate and involve specific social and moral ideas of excess, tolerance and stability. The statistical and the moral always trigger each other.

The statistical imagination works on the premise that people ideally gravitate towards a point of consensus over what specific categories mean. There should always be a shared basis between he who fills the form and they who read it. This sharing of terms and criteria is necessary for the filled-in information to make any collective sense. This sharing however is never complete.

The meanings of the categories *slim* and *stocky*, for instance, would vary with every person's self-image, with specific social and cultural understandings of fatness and healthiness, and with



unpredictable eccentricity of self presentation. In cases like these, then, statistics can never claim to work with constant units. Units would change even as the counting is underway. It can never involve theoretical universal abstractions, like the line, sphere or integer, possible in its contiguous branches of knowledge. Its *ways* of understanding these variables, then – the mean, the mode, the median, the graph – would be ways of appearing to make sense of the perverse data, of plotting it by ascribing to it provisional divisions and coherence of meaning to each of those divisions. There is no universal, shared idea of *slim* though the genre of the electronic form – being itself a way of plotting, lending itself to a counting – plods towards such an ideal abstraction. The form, then, is never an innocent document, it is already an episteme.

In terms less direct than the drop-down menu, however, the form is the very condition of the realisation of the self in different situations. The user's self is literally moulded out of nothing, slowly and steadily, as he fills up the form. He begins to take shape as a string of social codes, of visual appearances, of electronic data. Only in this way can he be brought into the circuit of recognisability i.e. be given form. He is brought into the parameters of common sense – always a tentative, variable thing – and is made into a figure that can be understood (using common, intelligible terms of description) and retained (using common standards of excess and readability).

For instance, for everybody that can be *slim, average, athletic, muscular, belly, or stocky*, it cannot be *grotesque, colourful, dreamy, flat, celebrated or menacing*; only some terms count, become intelligible and are treated as relevant and common-sensical. Only some terms can contribute to the 'basic' knowledge of the self, whereas others are indulgences over and above this 'basic' set. Hereafter, with these basic terms piled up, the user becomes an entity that can

be interacted with. In other words, this is way he is *given* to possible online interaction, this is the way he becomes useful to others. This is the way he plugs himself into the situation.

The self – as a formal problem – is stretched on the tenterhooks between a theoretical nothing, when you fill up none of the blanks, and a theoretical infinite, when you never stop filling up the form, when you keep on adding the fields to be filled up and keep on populating the given space of self-description in each field; *rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings*. In the field ‘Your Statement’, PR pegs itself onto this latter, necessarily theoretical possibility, saying ‘[h]ere you can talk about anything else you want to mention about yourself. There's plenty of space so don't limit yourself to just three words!’ (PR) The figure of the limitless always beckons forth. The ‘About Me’ section at *dosti.com*, an Indian social networking website, makes a similar suggestion to the user filling its registration form: ‘Now, tell the others what makes you so unique separates you from the rest. Don't be shy...now is the time for deep soul searching. Well not really but the more you put down, the better your matches.’

Although the form itself might *look like a diminution* (using, as it does, always a limited set of fields, always a limited space for description) it frames the filling up as *an act of infinite freedom*, of a fleshing out that is to be relished as volition, as indulgence, as choice; always a going forth and never a covert closing in. You can say whatever you want, how much ever you want. ‘In the arena of [modern] personal life, autonomy means the successful realization of the reflexive project of the self...’ (Giddens: 189). These are the ways in which the online user is readied for experiences of intimacy, the ways in which he readies himself. The form is his entry-point to the situation of online intimacies. The entry-point is itself situational, a part of the double game. His

everyday online experiences, exciting or discouraging or both, can then exceed this form. They can go on to make other moves.

### **(iii) Figures on *Planetromeo* and Why a Study of Figures is Important**

Desire between Indian men on PR is subject to specific figures. These figures can be gleaned from the thousands of Indian user profiles on the website. The short list of these figures would include the friend, the lover, the *mast* (playful), the migrant, the homosexual, the gay man, the online user and the effeminate. The long list could include the consumer, the ungrammatical one, the cruel one, the citer, the fit guy, the *decent*, the top and the bottom. An even longer list would index the moustachioed, the faker, the poetic, the *dilwala* (with heart), the laconic, the prolix, the old and the amateur.

This is a series of overlapping yet separately recognizable figures, many but always limited. These are the roles in which men enter the many situations of desire for each other, and the ways in which they make sense of themselves and of others in such events. Most figures, like the friend or the lover, are self-descriptions or descriptions intended for other people, that is, they figure *in* the vocabulary of the users. Others like the migrant, the online user, the citer, the consumer and the ungrammatical are not self-reflexive but interpretive figures, devised by us from outside the texts of these profiles, in order to understand these men and the roles they come to fill. Figures, then, are both primary and secondary. They are both the utterance and its analysis.

These figures are not outside the intimacy they precipitate. Intimacy is possible only in the currency of these figures. It would be the task of this chapter to flesh out some of the figures of same-sex desire used by Indian men on same-sex networking websites such as PR.

Each figure is a 'scene of language' (Barthes; 1978: 4); '[f]igures take shape insofar as we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that can be read, heard, felt. The figure is outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or a tale)' (*ibid.*). It is 'established if at least someone can say: "*That's so true! I recognise that scene of language*"' (*ibid.*).

The scene of language of the 'friend', for instance, would invoke a whole family of assorted figures. It would invoke the intimacy of the *dost*, the playfulness of the *yaar*, the togetherness of the companion, the casualness of the buddy, the longevity of the *humsafar* (the one who journeys with you) and the sensitivity of the *mitr*. The figure would evoke and concatenate their specific histories, their cultural associations and the different ways in which they work on ground as something immediately available to us.

Figures are ways of recognizing things, of understanding ourselves. They give us a model of subjectivity – worked out in this thesis – where each individual is an ever shifting cluster of figures. The terms of such figures are always interdisciplinary. For instance, the figure of the migrant will always involve a study of economic motivations, a reading of personal literature of dislocation and of sociologically understanding the experiences newly possible in the city. Each figure will always be a provisional coherence of many related terms, a cluster of signs, of other proximate figures, gravitating towards each other but never becoming one.

As another instance, the figure of the *mast* can at once evoke the *shayar* (poet), the *shaukeen* (the one with inclinations), the *baaz* (the one with habits), the addict, the playful, the flaneur,

the licentious, and the loafer. Desire between men online works itself out – is expressed, enacted, fulfilled – through irregular strings of such figures. These are the forms in which the people become intelligible to each other, even as they become intimate.

Some of these figures are shared across geographies and cultures, whereas others would largely make sense only in India and tentatively in its diasporic communities. Some are loan-words that travel across languages and accrue different meanings as they travel, such as the implications of ‘love’ in the North Indian variant of ‘love-cum-arranged marriages’ (Perveez Mody: 2006). Others, like ‘*dost*’ or ‘gay’, are subject to repeated translations (*friend*, *samlaingik*) and transliterations (*dost*, *दोस्त*) till it becomes difficult and pointless to tease out their separate meanings in any one language.

Figures are like so many pithy incipits, which refer to whole songs or books, compact codes which unlock elaborate programmes, topics which determine possible content, and clusters of sentences that facilitate specific situations, for instance, ‘I love you’ as a phrase mobilizing and sustaining a situation of romance (Barthes 3-6). These online figures can also be characters in the novelistic sense, having a series of individual character-traits and functions, distinguishable from others, and charting a specific course of their own. The romantic lover, for instance, would be a stock character in the modern narrative of romance, a generic requirement, something that would make sense of the mass of personal situations of sexual desire or affection by plotting them in an internally referential, bildungsromantic life story (Kaviraj: 2006, Orsini: 2006, Giddens: 1992). Others like the figure of the tactical online user, the *mast* or the *shayar*/poet would have an ironic relation to these narrative-friendly figures such as the romantic lover, never fully absorbed by the *fabulous* story of romance, never simply amenable

to be emplotted within a tale of individual growth or of a consistent pair. Figures, thus, both aid and obstruct each other.

Figures can also be visual, invoking a whole battery of signs of and for the body, as 'ugly' or 'beautiful', 'fit' or 'fat', 'twinky' or 'daddy-like'. These figures conjure a host of images. They both supplement and, more crucially, interpret the online profile photographs of people. They are categories through which we bring all that we desire or dislike to bear upon all that we see. These figures are the visual conventions of representing desirability and its obverse.

An extended parenthetical remark on why we need to study in terms of figures would be useful here. We study figures, above all, to offset another powerful strand of thought associated with same-sex desire. This strand can variously be called minoritizing, ghettoizing or specifying. It is driven by the questions of authenticity and conceits of truth. It always works under a necessary sign of commonness between all who desire someone of the same sex. This sign of commonness takes forms of shared life-stories and character traits, similar psychological makeup and bodies. This strand, most crucially, is never simply successful, never fully clouds the double gesture of sexual identity.

This strand tries to thin out the situations of sexual identity, to weaken their doubleness, tries to understand the event of sexual identity only within a limited template of meanings. It tries to give 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'straight' each their specific preconditions of intelligibility, each their remarkable lucidity. Sometimes this strand works as a political rhetoric within sections of the lesbian and gay rights movements and at other times it tries to consolidate a specific, statistical consumer base for gay and lesbian-specific leisure and recreation industries. I will invoke two instances to illustrate this strand.

First instance. Naisargi Dave, in telling the story of the early years of lesbian activism in Delhi, tells of how the idea of the group *Sangini* (she who is with you) was hatched. Naisargi asks Cath, who was instrumental in founding *Sangini* – a helpline, a meeting space – about its origins in 1990s Delhi. It is in Cath's answer that this strand reappears. Cath recalls, as Naisargi says, falling in love with Betu. Cath says that Betu 'gave me a major reason – not the only reason – to stay in India. It was a clash of worlds, between us though. My feminist-lesbian one and her straight and closeted one. I was relegated to invisibility again in her world, and I resented it, to be honest.' Cath says that she 'realized' in her encounter with Betu that she 'had found a real lesbian community in India...and I look at Betu and see this amazing thing. All the *dyke signifiers* without calling herself one! It was such an Indian lesbianism, as opposed to Giti's. Betu's was real, it was raw. No ideology. We needed a space for women like that' (quoted in Dave; 2009: 115) (emphasis mine).

Second instance. Discotheques and nightclubs in Delhi made a peculiar promise at the end of 2009. In working their New Year party policies they decided to open the doors to 'gay couples'. This was the first New Year celebration in the city after the Delhi High Court judgment that read down section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, decriminalizing same-sex sexual acts. Tarina Shah of Noida's up-end club Elevate said '[i]f the government has accepted, then we are all for it' (Sharma; 'Gay party goes on': 2009).

However Delhi nightclub owners had a peculiar worry, a worry that is possible only within the logic of this strand that we have called *specifying*. Afraid that 'straight' men will pose as 'gay' couples to gain the cheaper couple entry rather than the customary 'stag' charges for men, they devised a plan. Sohrab Sitaram of the nightclub Tabula Rasa said, '[w]e'll allow gay couples.

But will check the *genuinity* of the couple' (quoted in *ibid.*) (emphasis mine). The same Tarina Shah says that 'pretenders will be a problem, but we will have to use our discretion' (*ibid.*). DJ Rummy Sharma of Pure-The Club Lounge, considers checking the 'authenticity' of gay couples a complete non-problem. He has schooled his gate-managers in a peculiar lesson that rehearses Cath's game of signifiers. 'It is easy to assess' he says, 'if they are being honest. One of the partners in a genuine gay couple is a 'king' while the other is the 'queen'. And we engage them in a conversation to check if they are faking it' (*ibid.*).

It is in response to this peculiar lucidity, this easiness of checking that the study of figures unfolds, that the analytic of doubleness is proposed. In these instances, the rules to recognize 'gay' men or 'dykes' get folded into the category of the common-sense.<sup>29</sup> A problem is temporarily made to appear as a non-problem. This is the strand where same-sex desire can be read with a theoretically always limited and practically always tiny set of rules: Cath's signifiers, Shah's discretion, Sharma's criteria. It rests on a premise that there *are* distinct forms of recognisability for 'gay' men, as against the pretending 'straight' men. In fact the very possibility of faking, the point of worry for the Delhi club managers, is possible only within their premise. They make their own worry. They consider 'gay' men to exemplify a distinct set of

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<sup>29</sup> 'Lesbian' women – Cath's dykes – seem to be the non-subjects for Delhi clubs. As usually gratis entries in clubs, women pose no money crisis, and do not necessitate checks or even expectations of genuine 'lesbian' couples. One wonders how the figure of the female masculine, of the 'butch dyke' would interrupt the bouncers' imaginations.



characteristics that can then be aped, that can belie any self-report. Here, the script of gayness always already exceeds self-report because it is visual.<sup>30</sup>

The study of figures, however, explodes this premise. Same-sex desire is plucked out of this world-mapping of people as 'gay' and 'straight' and is reinstalled in its wider historical and rhetorical legacies. Here, the gay/straight map is necessarily only one of the ways of understanding or enacting same-sex desire. It is only one of the figures, always already in a conversation with others. Here, it is humble. It can only do so much and no more.

This allows us to explore a wider terrain of self-images of men in India and of intimacy between them. It allows various idioms of intimacy and the self to analytically coexist and clash against each other. Each figure is then given its due without exaggerating.

Framed this way, the study argues for the unsustainability of any one figure – gay, *laundebaaz*, migrant, lover or friend – in our bid to understand people on PR, their self-images and the ways in which they relate. If each of them is a figure, a scene of language, then one is never implicitly better than the other, one never explains all of the other. There is no one figure that is *more* basic or *more* elemental. A *laundebaaz*, for instance, is not a subset within gay. In the study of figures, we avoid lowest common denominators, we do away with supersets.

#### **(iv) The Migrant**

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<sup>30</sup> The sexologists Iwan Bloch (1872-1922) and Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), German and English respectively, used to search for female curves and lack of beards in *male homosexuals* and for enlarged clitorises and hanging sacks in *female inverts* (Bloch 1938, Ellis 1927). This is the sexological world of typed bodies and catalogued behaviors, where physicality and gestures become the visual codes to map people. The sexological map ever since its articulation in late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and colonial India has been relentlessly visual.

Related figures: the traveler, the online user, the autobiographical narrator, the itinerant, the consumer, the gay

'luding 4 cute, smooth n fair bottom. / i m 25 yrs, 5' 8", 60 kg, 30 w n average body top *without place*. i m not into relationship n just wnt long strnglss frnshp n fun vd a cute, smooth, sexy n fair bottom.no response 2 ny message without pic n bottom *vd place* is preferred' (bottomseeker, Noida, Delhi National Capital Region; PR) (emphasis mine)

I use *migrant* in its broadest root sense which implies any movement and shifting of location and any experience of new conditions and forms. Cities are a shifting sum of many kinds of movements and experiences. They are marked by immigrants, tourists and a steady traffic of daily itinerants. This active mass of motions is variously triggered by individual aspirations and dreams, by obligatory needs and a willed sense of duty, by active searches or by plain flanerie. These movements criss-cross between different kinds of urban living arrangements, as people dwell in formations as dissimilar to each other as nuclear families, college hostels, pavement communities, individual flats and slums. To be enclosed in one's own space or to have an entire ownership over the discretionary use of that space is not a general urban experience; people have a differential access to privacy, and moreover, they do not share the terms of what is counted or valued as privacy. Home as a site of permanence and of realization of personal dreams of intimacy is not available (or desirable) to everyone, every time. This urban web of movements is necessarily plotted onto another web which is the one of countless physical encounters.

Throughout most of year 1997 Jeremy Seabrook had spoken with men and boys in parks and bus-stops of Delhi (1999). These were men of varying ages and occupations and of different

places of origin. Of the seventy five men he interviewed, only sixteen called Delhi their native place. Others had come to the city mainly from the neighboring states of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, apart from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. This is the index of the extent of migration to Delhi in the last quarter of the twentieth century (*ibid.* 11-12) and of the experiences migration makes possible structurally.

The only commonality that tied all these men together was their search for other men. The public spaces of Delhi, such as Central Park in Connaught Place and Nehru Park in Chanakyapuri, became the sites of this search. Away from their families, their wives (of the 75 Seabrook spoke with, 29 were married and 2 were widowed), from their work or familial circuits where they could be recognized, these men experienced many kinds of intimacies with other men, whether it was conversations, sharing a joke, hand-job, blow-jobs, or intercourse. In the overbearing publicness of the park, little enclaves of privacy were carved behind the bushes, in darkness, in little conversations, or in public loos.

These little spaces, determined as they were by pursuits of pleasure, were also always surrounded by a threat of police, uniformed or in mufti, of *goondas* (goons) out to sexually abuse or blackmail men or of fateful chances of an exposure to someone known. While to the regular park patron – well versed in this game of cruising – it became more or less easy to ensure small moments of pleasure, there was always a possibility of being betrayed by circumstances. The maneuverability of the park, then, as a space of same-sex pleasure was never complete.

‘[I]t remains precarious, even in this protected site,’ Seabrook writes, ‘[s]uddenly, once more, the police are present. A corpulent officer in khaki, with red flashes on his uniform and a

revolver in his holster, is patrolling the jungle paths. He walks stealthily and for a moment looks like a hunter' (*ibid.* 173). The park – in real time – is always a place of pleasure *and* danger. In his fieldwork, Seabrook often sees 'a policeman in plain clothes, who has been acting as an *agent provocateur*, encouraging men to follow him into the bushes. In the jungle they round up and arrest a few *kothis* and their clients found with their pants down. They take a few of them to the police station' (*ibid.*).

It is in the context of the real-time simultaneity of pleasure and danger of the park that a parallel story of the 1990s becomes vital. This is the story of the spread of the internet. The park and the loo are never fully absorbed into this parallel story but they concede some of their plots, characters and actions to this online world. The internet is foregrounded here in one of its primary roles as a search tool and a proxy meeting space. Here, for its users, the internet takes the form of togetherness itself.

In an interview conducted over several hours into the night in July, 2007, Charan (name changed), Delhite, in his mid-30s, told me the story of how he first got to use the internet. 'It was 1996. [Charan was then 21] I knew by then I would not marry. I would remain single. I knew there were plenty of men who had sex with men in India, though I did not think there was anybody in India who was gay' (2007). At the end of that year Charan joined Cosmopolitan as a graphic designer. 'From money saved earlier, I bought a computer and a net connection. A friend of mine had got an internet connection. I thought this is the one way I can find someone. Someone somewhere in the world who I can talk to. Where I can share and have somebody to tell. I went to net with that idea' (*ibid.*). A desktop computer had cost Charan more than 50,000 rupees then and the net connection, in its early days of popularity, was at a hefty 15,000, for

500 hrs through a BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd.) telephone line. These were pricy figures but the urgency to get onto the internet to 'find someone' outweighed the cost.

He told me of the first night he used the internet in the privacy of his room. 'There was only Yahoo,' he said,

'I switched it on at night. Went into Yahoo.com. Wrote 'gay' in the search bar and pressed enter. 14 million websites! All were porn! It was then that I felt elated because I realized that if an entire giant porn industry can exist there must be a whole lot of gay men. That one realization was huge for me. Next seven days I spent jerking off on porn. It was a whole new thing. It was the first time fantasy came into my life...I found *gay.com*. There were no international floors for each country. Just one international room for everyone 'outside US'. I used to spend the whole day chatting on that. The first guy I met in Delhi through the website was Vikas...' (*ibid.*).

The shifting of the search for men from the public spaces to the internet is fitful, where the former is never entirely replaced, and depends on the access people have to technology. The prices of computers have come down drastically from the mid-90 price of 50,000+ quoted by Charan and the proliferation of urban internet cafes, in middle class and lower middle-class neighborhoods in Indian cities, means that the using the internet is no longer contingent on owning a personal computer. 'The growing popularity of cybercafés has been playing a big role in fuelling Internet development in India...an estimated 60% of [Indian] users regularly access the Internet via the country's more than 10,000 cybercafés' ('India' in Miniwatts Marketing Group: 2008)

This shifting of the active location of the search is of course partial. The internet is just one more way, although with its unique form and possibilities, of finding and meeting other people. A December 2009 search for number of PR users from Delhi returned the figure of 5636 users,

for all of Uttar Pradesh it was 1105 and for all of Maharashtra it was 9737. The availability of the internet, although on the rise, is always riddled with questions of its access, and crucially, of its access in private.

Although lots of cyber cafes have cubicles and curtains, or the computer screens set in such a way that only the user can see them, this is not commonly the case. PR user Karthik's complaint against the website is driven by this practical impossibility of a strictly private access to the internet:

'planetromeo should decrease the explicit porn stuff on the very 1st page, so that people who use the site from cyber cafe or a public place can use it with out any hassle, that too in a country like India' (karthik, in *guys4menblog.com*, June 2009).

However, in another interview in March 2007 with Rohan D'souza, late-20s, graduated from Jawaharlal Nehru University and working in Delhi where he had shifted from Thane for his college studies, I was told that the internet, at any rate, was a 'safer', more 'maneuverable' space for meeting other men than public spaces like parks. He said he was speaking having experienced both spaces. It is in this context that the peculiar wording of bottomseeker, quoted in the section's epigraph, makes sense. The bottomseeker from Noida, himself 'without place' searches for a bottom 'vd place'; the internet is a way of predetermining the location, finding a safe, uninterrupted venue for meeting other men. This is the opposite of real time desultoriness and is possible only within the peculiar form of the internet. Internet as a space of proxy physicality, and more crucially, of a proxy time. Your profile as always working behind your back – in another time independent from your body – always visible to others whether you are online or not. A proxy time in which real time encounters are talked about at ease and fixed as desired.

For the real time tentativeness of the park encounters, for all their quickness and unpredictability the internet seems to give a different, more expansive cyber time. Talking of such meetings in parks, Harish, who came from Bhopal and feels 'very lonely in Delhi', picks up on their peculiar temporality:

'[o]f course there are so many people here, you can make contact for sex very quickly...Sometimes I go to Nehru Park. There, people meet in darkness. They do not even see one another properly...[they] finish and go away...there is no continuity, no follow-up' (Seabrook: 130)

This is the interrupted temporality of real-time encounters in which apart from fears of being spotted, fears which inevitably rush these encounters, their shortness is also usually intended by the men themselves. Not everyone comes, like Harish, with a longing for continuity, for the encounter to be followed-up. To quote Harish again, and this time uninterrupted, we notice a peculiar hope that is hidden behind his wish for a continuity in encounters. This is a wish for lasting friendship, for the possibility of love. 'Of course there are so many people here,' he says,

'you can make contact for sex very quickly. But that is not what I want. I want love, but especially someone to take care of me. Sometimes I go to Nehru Park. There, people meet in darkness. They do not even see one another properly, let alone make a friendship. All they want is sex, then finish and go away, pretend it does not happen. There is no continuity, no follow-up, no friendship' (*ibid.*)

Another boy, Paras Ram, 22, says that all he wants is 'affection. Maybe sex will come, I do not know; but I want someone I can talk to, to whom I can tell everything that is in my heart' (129). In parks, he says, 'as soon as people have done sex together they lose interest in one another. I don't like that' (*ibid.*). For the real-time discordance of meetings in the physical cruising-grounds, the internet provides another kind of comfort time of interaction. For the temporariness of physical meetings and the low odds for sharing what lies in the heart, the

internet provides a possibility of thoroughness of scrutiny – *over virtual time* – the possibility of heart-to-heart chats, of those conversations which Harish and Paras consider the bedrock of affection, of friendship and love.

The irrevocable\_GUY from Meerut in Uttar Pradesh latches onto this peculiar possibility enabled by the form of the internet when he says that he is 'here [on Pr] to make "FRIENDS"...lets jst chat together to know more abt each other...' (PR). This is the desired clock-time of friendship. In fact, friendship is framed here as being possible and sustainable primarily by a sharing of time, by making a mutual gift of personal time. Rashid, a garment-worker who had come to Delhi from near Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, had told Seabrook that all he wanted was 'sex in a bed, no clothes, *aram se* [in comfort], taking it easy, then sleeping together with your legs wrapped around each other and in his arms. It doesn't happen very often, but I dream about it' (131). 'If you have a place of your own,' he says, 'if you have privacy in India, I think you can get almost anyone to come with you, whoever you are. Friendships here are in the park only; they finish at the bus stand outside' (*ibid.*).

Migration is an individuating phenomenon.<sup>31</sup> One of the peculiar collaterals of migration is that it temporarily isolates the self as the core object of narration. The self becomes the locus of all that migration entails, be it stories of movements, experiences of newness, or any good or bad lessons of individual progress. The self as experiencing a new place or a new-found sense of

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<sup>31</sup> One could dispute this by offering many examples, including the case of the Indian diaspora to the Gulf countries or generally of diasporic urban ghettos where people having plucked themselves out of one community space end up plugging themselves into another equally webbed community with its own collective ways of being. However, in my consideration, I want to sustain the very palpable individuating and liminalizing character of migration.



placelessness is the central motif of migration stories. This is not limited to stories of permanent immigration to new cities but also refers to the very sense of movement – any movement, any exchange of place, short-term or long-term – involved in the Latin *migrare*.

Migration triggers descriptions of oneself as journeying in an elsewhere, at once the object and the driving force of the story. It precipitates situations of self-reflection. Ram001 makes a user profile on PR. He writes: ‘hi i am new 2 bangalore, btm first stage lay out, any body hav place ping me’ (PR). A move to a new place triggers a battery of specific self-designations: *new, first stage et. al*. There is a crucial structural analogy between individuating experiences of migration and the private online experience. To access the internet is already to be on the move – almost always singly – to shift to a new place, to haphazardly cross different spaces and time-zones.

In talking about the new found sense of mobility among internet users in Ghana, four researchers tell stories which liken logging-in to experiences of travel. Both stories, they suggest, run the self through different locations and make it more self-aware even as it tries to understand this difference. Talking about one of their interviewees, the researchers report

‘that he chats with a friend in California about current events in the United States, and he tells his friend about politics and everyday life in Ghana. These conversations do not exist solely in the realm of the mind or in a virtual world; they are contextualized and situated in specific spaces and territories: they are real. In the past, said another informant, it was possible to meet and exchange ideas with such a variety of different people *only by moving*’ (Fair, Tully, Ekdale and Asante; 2009: 38-39) (emphasis mine)

To be online is always a sort of *moving*, a moving away from all that is entirely familiar. It is the point of meeting other people, of individually entering hitherto unfamiliar circuits, of being a part of something never or partially known before. chotugaadu is new to PR and says ‘helloo’ to ‘every friend in hyderabad’ before telling them that he is ‘new to dis site pleave help me out.am looking fr good friends yaar’. To be at once an amateur, a seeker, to plead for help and to be at

the threshold of a world of 'good friends' who are as yet unknown, is a situation activated by internet experienced *as* migration, that is, an individual movement driven by dreams and needs.<sup>32</sup>

In his essay *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, John D'Emilio gives a central place to migration in writing the history of gay and lesbian identities in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. He considers sexual identities nothing but a sum of the ways in which we arrange our lives in relation to our desires. Capitalism, according to D'Emilio, ushers new conditions for this particular arrangement of the category of life. With the withering away of the family as an independent unit of production, it became necessary and possible for men (and less so for women) to move out of their places of origin to new places of employment. This was the reality triggered by the rise of capitalist wage labour.

'Only when *individuals* began to make their living through wage labour, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for sexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex' (1983: 104-5) (emphasis in original)

Men suddenly found themselves away from their family, living alone, in hostels, in same-sex dormitories and same-sex places of work. They also found a category of leisure time that could be spent outside the family, a time that they had to spend based on individual inclinations. These were decidedly new conditions and possibilities of socialization. Of the people erotically

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<sup>32</sup> Formally, chotogaadu is in exactly the same place in his movements – of migration, of experiencing new things, of finding friends – as the young founder of PR was when he had shifted to London. It was migration which had triggered the making of PR in the first place. It is unsurprising then, that the structure of PR, and its finding home nowhere else but on the internet, responds especially to the needs and desires of those in a position of itinerance. For those affected by the political economy of large scale movement to cities and towns, PR reduplicates the experience of migration with an added seduction of emotional and sexual success.

interested in their own sex, some gravitated towards each other and began to entertain ideas – even if inconsistent and haphazard – of a group life.

‘Already, in the early twentieth century, large cities contained male homosexual bars’ (105). Riverside Drive in New York City and Lafayette Park in Washington became cruising grounds for men. Specific places got saturated with codes of possibility for men meeting other men. ‘Public bathhouses and YMCAs became gathering spots...’ (*ibid.*). ‘Simultaneously,’ D’Emilio writes,

‘ideological definitions of homosexual behavior changed. Doctors developed theories about homosexuality, describing it as a condition, something that was inherent in the person, a part of his or her “nature.” These theories did not represent scientific breakthroughs, elucidations of previously undiscovered areas of knowledge; rather, they were an ideological response to new way of organizing one’s personal life. The popularization of the medical model, in turn, affected the consciousness of the women and men who experienced homosexual desire, so that they came to define themselves through their erotic life’ (*ibid.*) (emphasis in original)

Migration isolated for these men and women an independent life-story, which was increasingly more internally referential, being as it could be, without the outside references and obligations towards the family or the need to procreate. Around 1955, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, founded the San Francisco group ‘Daughters of Bilitis’ for women who desired women, noting that ‘[w]omen needed privacy...not only from the watchful eye of the police, but from gaping tourists in the bars and from inquisitive parents and families’ back home (quoted in Meeker; 2006: 77). The migration story was often framed as the story, even if partial, of self-realization and movement of an individual, of being able to chart out on one’s own without being seen by some. The newly and increasingly possible experiences of same-sex intimacy in the city were inevitably treated as the subsets of this larger story. The ‘coming-out’ story came to involve, more often than not, a literal *coming out* – from the house, family, village, any context of origin – a movement that is structurally indispensable to the narrative of sexuality. The individuated

migrant story is one of the conditions of possibility for sexual identity, for the very modern way of understanding sexual experiences only *in* a narrative realization of one self, as a coming into one's own.

In India, this teleology is more interrupted. It cannot explain all instances and conceptions of same-sex desire. Capitalist migration, like elsewhere, does create the conditions of possibility for a 'gay community' – with now decade old parties, new fashion salons, safe meeting spaces and holiday planners – but all migration does not simply lead to a 'gay community'. Here the playing ground is always already populated by a multiplicity of idioms. 'Gay' finds itself already interweaved with ideas of habits and personal inclinations, with flexible boundaries of male friendship, with an already higher mobility of men in marriage, and with conceptions of what is considered excessive but not uncommon. 'Gay' never simply takes over these other idioms.

For understanding this, we need to have a working knowledge about this figure of 'gay'. We need to elaborate how *identification as gay* is actually lived out. For if we are able to prove that this process of identification is never final or complete, then we would have performed a space-clearing gesture for the other idioms, for all the other figures. We would have proved that 'gay' emerges not in an erasure of other idioms. Instead, it emerges in between them, in their little interruptions, always short of winning over them, and crucially, always short of winning over even him who openly identifies as 'gay'. This makes room for us to observe the complex self-images as they are lived out in the everyday. This was the whole point of studying in terms of figures rather than take the 'gay' of a 'gay dating website' as a simple point of departure.

#### **(iv) *The Gay***

Related figures: the migrant, the scene-queen, the consumer, the online user, the community member, the activist

‘Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over it became a butterfly / i am here to meet people be with them and be my self chill over acup of coffee or roll in bed .....important part is that to be with *the gay world*.....Mummmmmmmmah’ (gingernut, Pune; PR) (emphasis mine)

In introducing John D’Emilio’s essay when it first appeared in a collection of essays, the editors made a crucial distinction. They disaggregated his work from psychoanalysis. ‘Elsewhere in the volume,’ they said, ‘Adrienne Rich argues for a profound lesbian identity, one forged in the ties of infancy; she separates this ‘lesbian existence’ from the evolution of a gay male life which she sees as anomic and very far from nurturant’ (Snitow, Stansell and Thompson; 1983: 100). John D’Emilio, they were certain, was on a different tack. He used a different model of arriving at sexual identity. He, they argued,

‘would no doubt disagree from this claim of historical discontinuity between gay men and lesbians, since...he sees the creation of the ‘homosexual’ of either sex as a specific, modern phenomenon. Lesbians, he argues, were rarer presences in the ‘male space’ of streets, parks and bars because of women’s continued economic dependence on men. It was economic oppression, not a more caring nature, he implicitly argues, that kept them more quietly at home’ (*ibid.*).

D’Emilio sets his arguments in a different setting. The clauses important for D’Emilio are not those which sustain the alleged psychoanalytic or bodily make-up of the homosexual woman or man. Instead of the big players like the unconscious, ‘the ties of infancy’, or the primal memories of childhood which might leave a permanent imprint on an individual and determine her sexuality – and nurturing ability – forever, D’Emilio’s field has a different *dramatis personae*.

He looks at economic processes, physical locations, distance from family and new spaces for socialization as the crucial criteria for new arrangements of life and memories, arrangements that are especially conducive to the creation and adoption of gay and lesbian identities or for forming different groupings based on a shared desire for the same sex. His study of urbanization is in terms of new arrangements of 'life' in the city that can coordinate individual episodes of same-sex desire into narratives of self-advancement and self-realization.

D'Emilio does not read people or situations psychoanalytically, but instead – and this is a crucial distinction – he reads psychoanalysis historically, as only *one* of the many factors that triggered people to read their lives, attractions, living patterns and encounters within umbrella terms such as homosexual, gay or lesbian. He elaborates on many other dimensions of coming together on the basis of shared desires.

For instance, *gay* for D'Emilio, would not simply be a condition of being, a name for oneself, but instead, it would be an imaginative gesture to participate in group situations. It would not be a wholesale adoption, but a more provisional plugging-in. It would be a sign insisting on togetherness – be it in events, in locations or in life-styles – which provides more opportunities to meet other men. The gesture implicit in *gay* would then *link* people as much as it would *tag* them. D'Emilio would foreground the former mobilizing aspect inherent in the word, its abilities to bring together a mass of people and be a presiding sign over this togetherness, as much as its latter, more individuating role of marking particular people *as* gay.

These points of togetherness ordered under the totemic symbol of *gay* would be shored up by an array of consumption practices and a set of urban locations which are the consistent sites of meeting and recreation. At the very edge of thinking that his world is over, gingerbread leaps out

of his larval stage and transmogrifies into a butterfly and what beckons him is his imagination of *the gay world*. Gingenut's story is of a piece with the ebullient narratives of self-realization that are explained better by a political economy like D'Emilio's than by the psychoanalysis of Rich.

The *gay world*, or in its more common urban idiolect, the *gay scene* is the main location for such narratives. The gay scene works as shorthand for an array of experiences, practices of consumption and memories. It is not *simply there* but is imagined into being. When discotheques with 'gay nights' and websites with 'gay dating', when pride marches voicing 'gay rights' and salons servicing 'gay people' are frequently heard about or lived out, when they begin to sediment into people's imagination, when they trigger a template of wonderful and terrible experiences, a peculiar world begins to take shape. In these experiences the word 'gay' worlds itself, it begins to accrue a recognizable (because consistent) set of urban references. This world – *the gay scene* – at once a wonderland calling for exploration, a butt of regrets, and a dreamland of possibilities.

We will see how *PR* users articulate this gay scene into being. Every online utterance about this scene supplies it with a cumulative set of characteristics. These utterances are, most commonly, made at the *gateways* of this scene, by those people who are either *new to it*, by those dissatisfied with it or by those who feel they cannot or do not want to be a part of it. It is at these many thresholds of the scene that its descriptions occur. A definition of a thing is best garnered at its edges, at the points of entry and departure. The scene itself is not 'an unproblematically verifiable social entity but...a rhetorical construction, produced...through a number of key spatial tropes as location, home, stage' arrival and leave taking (Payne: 2007).

For the new, it is almost always a space of unbridled promise and a little hesitation. Here ‘the scene is figured as destination – a place of arrival and welcome’ (*ibid.*). phoenix382, from Ahmedabad writes on his profile on *PR*: ‘visiting for a few days / excited. is there a gay scene in Ahmedabad - help a tourist find the right places’. The gay scene is clearly an urban imaginary composed of a theoretically limited number of ‘right places’. The scene then has to be a shifting set of directions practically pointing to such places. Here the scene becomes a marketable touristic vision of the city (*help a tourist find the right places*), appearing most exemplarily in the genre of travel guides like the *Lonely Planet* or the *Spartacus Gay Guide*. For instance, the Spartacus hotel guide for gay men responded to the July 2009 Delhi High Court judgment by noting the overhaul in the *scene* – ‘India's newly emerging LGBT communities,’ it said, ‘along with changing gay scene in larger cities such as Delhi is an exciting development...gay nights are becoming more and more popular in several discos and bars’ (‘India’ at spartacusworld; accessed January, 2011).

*PR* user Gaurav\_18 from Raipur in Chhattisgarh does not point us yet to those proverbial ‘right places’ but elaborates on this *scene as a series of expectations*. Setting himself up as an amateur on the scene, he writes:

‘Hi friends, a new kid on the block in the gay scene is here, i am 19, fresh, raring to go,i am seeking to be a model, but first i want to be a good human being, god gave me looks and i am thankful for that, but definitely not proud of that as it says beauty lies...I am a very fun loving and warm hearted person. Hope i get good friends through this site Thanks for reading my profile.Hey i also wanna add sex seekers, i wanna b polite to u,but i m not ur cup of tea..My fave Quotation is... The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep. / Robert Frost. [pultizer prize winning american poet] / I hope u liked it too, it touches me as many times as i read’ (*PR*, ellipsis and box brackets in original)



The gay scene is expected to be a substantive meeting space (*hope I get good friends*) and the website which assists in such meetings, even enacts them, is always already a part of this scene (*hope I get good friends through this site*). Gaurav's interrupted prose is full with expectations and it works as a clumsy signpost for the scene. It is where he expects friendships to materialize – which is why he indulges in the common tactics of the 'personal ad' where you describe yourself, your interests and ambitions, give your favorite quotations *et. al.*, that is, you set yourself up as a script awaiting perusal, and hopefully interest and 'compatibility'. This is also a space where he expects he might run into 'sex seekers' who are an integral part of Gaurav's imagination of the scene and are precisely what he wants to avoid – the scene as reckless, to be maneuvered by restraint, *the scene as a bunch of invitations and rejections*. The words of the new always prefigure a peculiar world through their expectations. The scene is what they expect into being. *The scene as a set of dreams*.

Gaurav is self-avowedly 'a new kid on the block' and is yet to set his expectations at the altar of experience. It might be interesting to shift to the profiles of the self-avowedly experienced, even the disgruntled, for understanding the alleged 'right places' of the scene, places that both invite and repulse, that accommodate you but often also tacitly disqualify. *The scene as the shattering or realization of dreams*.

I cite three *PR* users at that particular moment when they try to describe this scene. Kamal09 from Hyderabad associated the scene with a few set leisure locations even as he distances himself from them. 'Just a simple guy,' he calls himself, who is 'here looking forward to chat with people. not much into gay scene. so please don't try to invite me to gay pubs or parties. i do have a good group of people where i can go and enjoy ...u know what i mean' (*PR*).

Rony2009 from Bangalore prefigures the scene as a place for muscular male bodies primed in the gym and sustained under the sign of fitness as *bon sens*, the sign of muscle as beauty; '[t]he gay scene is good for some people but not for me...I am not into muscles, although I like the gym, sensible walking shoes, although I see why they make sense' (PR). Yourboy from Bangalore writes that he does 'like to go out with mates for dinners, drink or even clubbing' but that he is 'not much of a scene queen at all, lol!' He adds that he prefers to go to 'straight clubs to gay clubs....they tend to be less seedy! (And tend not to stink of urine so much...lol!) But yeh, do go out to gay scene from time to time. Also like nights in at home on the sofa in front of the television' (PR)

Peter Jackson studies the structural conditions of possibility of international urban 'gay capitals' and it is no coincidence that their primal condition is that of a well-elaborated market economy. 'Research on global queering,' he says, 'has concentrated on cities that, in popular gay parlance, are called "gay capitals"—Amsterdam, London, Paris, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, Bangkok, and Tokyo—all of which are in countries with long histories of market economies' (2009: 370). 'A gay capital,' he argues, 'is a metropolis commonly regarded to be the first site of the emergence of new male homosexual identities and cultures in a particular region. It is a city with the largest commercial gay scene in a region, a site for homosexual immigration' (*ibid.*).

In the three citations, from Rony, Kamal and Yourboy, the gay scene begins to assume a limited, that is, a coherent set of meanings in sync precisely with this market economy. Its meanings majorly depend on a burgeoning middle class with increasing spending power in a liberalized market. The rhetorical centre of this scene is often a muscular affluent English-speaking gay

man who frequents urban gay-exclusive spaces at ease. The gay scene itself is a market-friendly phenomenon. It works as an urban constellation of related acts of consumption. It relies on '...the so-called gay marketing moment, when 'coming out' meant coming out in terms of purchasing power' (Puar; 2002:104).

Paul Birrell, of Pride London, the commercial body that organizes the annual pride marches in London, makes clear how embedded gay scenes and their expressions are in local urban businesses. The 2009 July London Pride's titular message was 'Come and play'. A more 'politicized' message, Birrell said, was avoided due to conditions of local sponsorship. 'If we were heavily politicised,' he said, 'there's no way we would be in Oxford Street and Regents Street. The traders wouldn't want it and they have a lot of clout with the council, but when they can see it attracts people into the city, they're happy' (quoted in McVeigh: 2009). *Come and play* is a teasing variation of *come and spend*. It is a transformed form of 'gay politics' where the strategy of visibility, articulated most strongly in the 1960s/70s moment of gay lib in Western Europe and the States, has increasingly come to mean visible consumption in the city. The very word 'scene' is 'more appropriate to the *worldliness* of a subculture that participates in a global capitalist economy and is open to global influences' (Gelder; 2005: 9) (emphasis mine).

Rony, Kamal and Yourboy each have peculiar relationships with this scene. Crucially enough, no one is ever fully at the center of this scene, its full participant. The ultimate scene-queen remains a rhetorical device. They set themselves up at different distances from the scene and the acts of consumption it entails. Each of them is at a tangent to it. Similarly, PR user True\_Companion from Bombay says that "[a]s for me, I love music, reading, spending time outside of the 'gay scene', and hanging out with my close friends. I enjoy just simple pleasures

in life - a movie, a good dinner... life doesn't have to be extravagant - although occasionally that is nice to splurge on' (PR). The scene is never a simple object of participation for *all* users. It is always an object of reflection, a reflection that is structurally a distancing maneuver. These distances are variously elaborated as choice, as distribution of personal time *outside* and *inside* the scene, as pure inability to be in it or as sour dissatisfaction with it.

Ken Gelder, in elaborating the history of subcultural studies in Euro-American scholarship since the early 1940s, makes a significant remark about how people always inhabit subcultures in an uneven way. If subcultures are, in some loose sense, about thinking about one's group identity as different from an imagined norm, then these differences never take one form and are never valued or adopted consistently. They are at once bemoaned, relished and exploited by its participants (Gelder: *ibid.* 1). Subcultures can never become wholly discrete entities for its members to inhabit (8). Gelder argues that point of inhabiting a subculture is already a point of its leakage. In elaborating on the Californian sociologist John Irwin's 1977 book *Scenes*, which first introduced this term as a cultural analytic, Gelder argues that

'[o]ne's attachment to scenes can stem from choice rather than predicament; relations to them may be 'casual' rather than complete or permanent; they may change routinely, but they can also 'overlap' so that one's social identity can be associated with a *number* of scenes rather than just one' (*ibid.* 11) (emphasis in original)

There is no one patent relationship with the scene. There are always inconsistent and jagged lines of discontinuity between the imagined subcultural world and its participants. In talking about the 'gay world', Delhi PR user not\_intrested marks his relationship with the scene with a streak of mordancy: '[i]n D City Of Sex Don't Expect Love.If U R Expecting...Get Prepared With Some Hanky Nd Tissues...Coz Gay World Is Face World..Here Relation n Ppl Get Changed Like Clothes.. U Wear Dem Or Remove Dem Upto U...' (PR). Similarly, vviisshaall from Bombay

articulates his specialized relationship with the scene. 'Please note,' he says, 'I'm looking forward to have discreet friendship with only good looking and closet gays or bisexual guys...so, feminine guys, and the ones who are openly gay, very much into the gay scene, belonging to gay groups and attending gay parties...pls pls pls excuse me, bcoz we wont gel together' (PR). For vviisshhaall, the scene is cast by too much *openness* and by a peculiar masculinity which calls attention to itself, which catches the eye and does not pass. He relates to this overbearing scene by making demands of discreteness from its members, by excusing himself from those who can not. The entry to the scene is always necessarily partial.

It is clear that *gay* as a *scene* or as an *identity* is never occupied simply or steadily over time by people. Gay is not a permanent name but a series of situations. It is an object of a wavering relationship. It is always an inconsistent contract of belonging through consumption, through experiencing togetherness *in* and *outside* consumption. It is constantly reimagined over time, rehashed by experience and reflected upon in casual or serious, delighted or dissatisfied online exchanges. *PR* is the place of this wavering relationship – being its trigger point – and the very form that this relationship takes.

#### **(vi) The Lover**

Related figures: the friend, the poet, the narrator, the *mehboob*, the *kaatil*, the romancer, the online user, the consumer, the compatible, the *premi*

'We duly felt the right anguishes' (John Fowles, *The Magus*; 1966: 17)

27 year old Chandan from Delhi takes recourse to a popular cliché related with love. He launches his profile with a slightly impish line: 'Do you believe in love at first sight or should i walk by again...:-)' (PR). The idea of *love at first sight* is integral to the modern idea of romance. It is always a moment of revelation of everything special in the other and it always prefigures a shared future with this other. It is a hugely loaded moment saturated with expectation and a formally religious belief – Chandan specifically asks '[d]o you believe...?' – in its ability to reveal a lot in a little time. It is above all a narrative device that is crucial to the modern plot of romance, being as it is more often than not a retrospective utterance used to hold together a narrative; *it had been love at first sight et. al..*

Anthony Giddens locates the rise of the idea of romantic love with the rise of the genre of the novel in the late eighteenth/nineteenth century in Europe (1992: 40). '[T]he connection,' he says 'was one of newly discovered narrative form' (*ibid.*). This new literary narrativization of love was embedded in social and legal changes of the nineteenth century, particularly of women staking greater claims to rights over their own life and its choices, such as reproduction, career and marriage, making individual life into something that could be owned and maneuvered like one's own story (1-3). Romantic love, he argues, makes of passionate attachments or moments of attraction something that is uniquely projectionable into an individual's future; '[s]uch love projects in two senses: it fastens upon and idealizes another, and it projects a course of future development' (45).

*Love at first sight* functions as the launching action in this narrative course. As part of the romantic plot, it always has to overwork its capacities than just an independent moment of attraction; '[i]nsofar as immediate attraction is part of romantic love...it has to be separated

quite sharply from the sexual/erotic compulsions of passionate love. The 'first glance' is a communicative gesture, an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other. It is a process of attraction to someone who can make one's life, as it is said, 'complete' (40). The first meeting might be a capturing of the heart, but it is almost always framed as a beginning of a mutual narrative biography of the two that make up the romantic pair (46).

Romantic love is always composed of the secular and the sacred interrupting each other. '[T]he more I live, the more I think / two people together is a miracle' (Rich; 1976: poem XVIII). 'Or in this poem, [t]here are no miracles...[i]f I could let you know...two people together is a work / heroic in its ordinariness' (ibid. poem XIX). The eighteen year old PR user tman3108 from Chandigarh reposes a degree of expectation habitually invested in the first meeting: 'im a fun guy n wanna meet someone cute with a good personality...if you're him...lets meet n *see if there's a spark....*' (PR) (emphasis mine). This first sight carries the baggage of its possible revelatory function – at core a sacred function – and this always yields peculiar metaphors of chance such as *spark*. The possibility of love is always latent in the first sight but it will not always come through. There is a necessarily aleatory (because always unpredictable) connection between the first sight and the possibility of durable love that it is supposed to trigger.

Like with the Biblical God's grace in 16th century European Calvinist interpretations, some are predestined to be received into God's favour and others are not (Calvin: 1536). Human beings can never know who the chosen ones are so all must necessarily continue to believe in divine munificence. This essential and canonical impossibility of human pre-knowledge shapes the

Christian sacred traditions with the maxim that only God foreknows everything and that there is always a need to believe in his kindness.

It is in this sense that romantic love never becomes a fully secular feeling in terms of form because there always has to be an element of belief that has to compensate for the chanciness of first meetings and invoke tentative, desired futures out of the exigencies of the present moment. 'In short, *whatever happens*, knowing that it is ordered by the Lord, he will receive it...' (Calvin; 1536: Book 3, Chapter 7) (emphasis mine). Belief is always a way to override chance by plotting it in a causal narrative, even if the cause is usually the grace of the primal divine, or the happening of love. Here, '[r]omantic love,' treated as a causing agent, makes of '*amour passion* [passionate love] a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence' (Giddens: 45), that is, to a projected longevity of the romantic connection. 'Love is never wanting to lose faith, never wanting to give up, and never truly moving on' (antariksha\_saxena, New Delhi; PR). Romantic love, formally similar to religious faith, becomes a 'potential avenue for controlling the future, as well as a form of psychological security (in principle) for those whose lives are touched by it' (41).

The spark, in the wide ranging aleatory metaphors of online users variously reincarnates in popular PR bywords such as *chemistry, tuning, clicking together, special, our wavelengths, gelling et. al..* The first sight of the romantic other is prearranged like an epiphany, expected like a sacred appearance. Romantic love is often framed as the only possibility of a miracle *in* the modern secular realist universe in which it is plotted. It perseveres as such *despite* this emplotment within a generically realist-causal framework which treats this miracle as a bit of a joke – Chandan's 'do you believe...or should i walk by again'. love\_forever23, from Pune, hooks



himself onto the paradox implicit in Chandan's joke. The paradox between the realist uncertainty of this miracle of first sight and yet of a sacred belief in it. 'Kab kaun kaha kis tarah pasand aajaye,' he says, 'aur wo hamari life ka sabse special person ban jaye pata hi nahin chalta...I know mere liye bhi koi hai aisa' ['Who knows, sometime, somewhere, we might begin to like someone and he might become our life's most special person...I know there is someone like this for me'] (PR). *Who knows* and *I know* coexist in the modern concept of romantic love.

kisu<sup>85</sup> from Hooghly in West Bengal rehearses the common wisdom of over-apophoristic greeting cards when he writes: 'its not miracle to make good friend but its miracle to have a friend who will b wid u *always*' (PR) (emphasis mine). The real miracle of the first sight was never simply the promise of love but of its longevity – the promise of the many sights after the *first*. Writing at the end of the century of the novel in Europe, Oscar Wilde had felt the pulse of this widespread, allegedly ridiculous belief in the miracle of romantic love understood as long narrative, understood as a matter of *always*. A belief which the long and realist form of the novel fed into and ordinarized in its non-epic, bourgeois protagonists, even as it implicitly questioned it by placing it within the everyday conflicts and interruptions staple of the narrative form. *In narrative*, lay the realist inconsistencies of love. However, precisely, *in narrative*, lay the sacred seduction that these inconsistencies might continue. 'Always! That is a dreadful word,' Wilde wrote through his character Henry Wotton, '[t]hey spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever' (Wilde; 1890: 18). Romantic love, in terms of the modern novel form, works as a promise of a shared, durable narrative. Something that would not be warranted by passionate enthrallment, of the *extraordinary* epic kind, or in sexual attraction by itself.

The modern premise of this faith in the miracle of love is not any divine promise, immutable kinship structure or continued sexual attraction but the more secular 'qualities' of the individual other, such as intelligence, personal style or career prospects. Each person looking for love is individualized as a unique string of these qualities. 'Am handsome, intelligent, career oriented, stylish, gym toned and single. Seek d same' (chiseled, Bombay; PR). Love, and the pervasive search for it, has become a more individuating phenomenon in the last two centuries culminating in the self-oriented genre of the user-profile on dating websites like PR. I explain the history of this individuation with the case of the modern Bengali novel.

In attempting to write a 'history of love' for South Asia, Sudipta Kaviraj notices a 'historical transformation' underway in the presiding meanings of love throughout the nineteenth century (2006: 162). The ideal that is in decline, he argues, is the conventional shringaric ideal of Sanskrit aesthetic theory. This ideal, which qualifies as a distinct 'aesthetic way of seeing the world' (166) saw the beauty of the body (usually feminine) as interchangeable with the beauty of the world (*ibid.*) The shringaric conception of beauty was primarily of rupa i.e. beauty of the physical form, something that dazzled the eyes and transformed the physical, emotional state of the onlooker.

'The shringaric aesthetic does not regard looking for physically and materially beautiful things and people as problematic, or even remotely shame-inducing' (165). Physical beauty was emphasized as a primal value, a widespread descriptive metaphor and a strong and persuasive force. In Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* ('The Cloud Messenger') the evening that gradually darkens over a hill resembles a breast:

‘[The mountain] with its slides covered with mango trees shining with ripe fruits will certainly attain the state of being looked at by pairs of gods, for it resembles the breast of the Earth, black in the centre and pale white in the surface’ (quoted in *ibid.* 166)

In pre-modern Sanskrit literature, heroines like Shakuntala and Parvati are often described as having great physical beauty and even male figures like Rama and Krishna, particularly the latter, are described as supremely attractive (164-6).

Throughout the nineteenth century, however, there was a change in the moral ideals and the formal structure of love. The route of this change can be haphazardly traced in the novels of the Bengali author Bankimchandra (1838-1894) who ‘performed a significant re-orientating operation on this traditional aesthetic structure and crucially turned it in a modern direction’ (167).

Although exceptional beauty is still paid a literary tribute in his works, he denounces the excessive sexuality of the Sanskrit high texts considering them *ashlila*, obscene (168). Physical beauty became increasingly obscured by a ‘heightening of descriptive language, the subtle and complex use of poetic tropes’. The Krishna-gopi *vastraharana* (stealing of clothes) episode in the Bhagvata narrative was found to be so offensive by Bankim that he refused to provide a translation of those lines from Sanskrit, considering them incommunicable in the modern Bengali ‘intelligible to women and children’ (*ibid.*). These moral lessons newly considered physical beauty of Bankim’s heroines to be a tragic curse within the novel’s narrative of the social relations of the family. In terms of this narrative, physical beauty became a ‘prefiguration of emotional disaster’ (169).

Beauty, in Bankim, takes *an emotional turn* and begins to be decoupled from the physical form and riveted instead to ‘expectations of calm enjoyment, of a general fulfillment and

enhancement of life' (*ibid.*), that is, these are the beginnings of the entrenchment of the concept of *love as prem*. This change is precisely a problem of form, that is, of approximating the shringaric ideal of love to the new narrative form of the novel that charts individual growth through a causal connection of plot moments. Shringaric love has to be acclimatized to this modern narrative of individuation and self-realization. Beauty would no longer be of the supreme physical feminine type, as in Sanskrit poetic conventions, but instead interiorized, individualized and emotionalized within modern realism as *prem*.

Kaviraj locates the climax of this acclimatization in Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) novels and narrative poems. What is emphasized in his heroines is not their physical beauty but their inner emotional character, traits of which would peg their growth within the novel. 'Against this underdetermination of their physical appearance stands the constant emphasis and elaboration of their emotional character: their perceptions, ways of feeling, ways of thinking and their personal development through the staple of the Bildungsroman – misunderstandings, moral examination and eventual resolution' (172). These are figures of ordinary beauty but of an extraordinary inner character. They make sense not within the frame of high Shringaric poetry, or even the Urdu poetic form of the *ghazal*, but instead within the frame of the social novel. It was in the popularity of the novel, that this modern concept of *love as projecting individual depth* marked its first decisive moment.

Vijay Saini's demand on *dosti.com*, an Indian website for 'friendship and dating' for men and women, comes at the end of the almost two century long popularization of this *prem* ideal. 'Mujhe ak aise sathi ki talash hai,' he says, 'jo bashak jyadan sundar na bhi ho to chalega per ak sunder dil ki malik ho. aur jo apne nature se mere sansar main khushiyan bikher de [I am in

search of such a lover who, although she might not be very beautiful, should be an owner of a beautiful heart. And who, with her nature, will spread happiness in my world]' (Saini, *dosti.com*; accessed December, 2009). This casual use of 'nature' to describe the emotional traits of a lover, her inner universe, fits well within the individuating turn of love.

Like the story of the ascent of the modern romantic ideal told by Giddens, Kaviraj's story tells of the rise of emotional ideals of love as embedded in the newly consolidating genre of the novel, of personal characters traits as significant factors for love, and of the thing called the 'mutual compatibility' of these traits that was later popularized in the genre of self-help literature on romantic relationships (Giddens: 87-110). This 'compatibility' was the new secular equation of love, it was the possibility of it happening, the possibility of that notional *spark*.

'Compatibility matters!' (Ranbirjain27, Uttar Pradesh; PR). On PR, Piyush8 from Bombay rehearses the proverbial spark as a chemical metaphor of chance: '[t]he meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed' (PR). The modern ideals of romance provide a peculiar setting for such experiments between people. They organize the very conditions of possibility and the course of such encounters. PR becomes their heightened testing ground. Self detailing user-profiles are nothing but basic, required scripts of *love understood as a compatibility experiment*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In an interview I conducted with the founder of the website *PlanetRomeo*, Jens, he told me about the online search of love through the 'right criateria', that is, through the frame of compatibility: 'AK: The trigger that got Planet Romeo started was loneliness of a boy in London, an inability to meet the 'right' guy, the perfect Cinderella fit. In some sense Planet Romeo sells that which is the common dream of our times that in our lives we will find a special person who will salvage us. Has the website made this search easier or messier? / Jens: Although internet can never really replace physical contact, it is a great jumping board to make acquaintances. So PR makes it easier to make the first step and put yourself out there. That has definitely been made a lot easier, since its rather

In his lecture 'About Love' Michael Hardt made a simple point that love 'may be natural but is not at all spontaneous, or rather the forms of love are not spontaneous' (2007). It seemed to him 'that love requires organization or training, in other words there are better ways of loving, there are different ways of loving' (*ibid.*). It is in this sense that love encounters on PR often find themselves happening under the organizing sign of compatibility.

Compatibility is one of the major keywords of romantic love, one of its chief *ways* of occurring. It is an examining mechanism that produces report cards on the possibility of love between any two people. Formally, this ensures that those people that are to meet each other have to be exhaustively profiled, *as personalities*, prior to and during such a meeting.

This entails that the central text on PR, its basic online unit, the user-profile, has to function as a ripe individuated script for the compulsory test of compatibility. It does this by being saturated with individual descriptors like *tastes, hobbies, interests, likings, values, one's nature, shauk* (interests), *pasand* (favorites), *temperaments*, and *types*. jeevan\_wlnew from Bangalore writes that his 'hobbies are reading, watching movies, some good literature, some politics, a lot of fitness related, sports and the last thing is IT...I am an IT guy' (PR). ajayshinde from Bombay says that he is 'an ardent lover of music and an instrumentalist', that he is a 'socially inclined guy with an interest in spirituality sans religion n superstitions' (PR). He 'believes in intellectual quotient and emotional quotient' and is

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anonymous and you can turn it off any time you want. On the other hand, it has made the search perhaps more complicated too. With more than 1 million active users of the website worldwide and around 90,000 guys online simultaneously on our website it is likely that you can't keep track of everyone and *you may miss on the 'love of your life' simply because you haven't put the right criteria in your search'* (Jens; prsnl email: Feb 20, 2010, emphasis mine).

‘searching for a partner with whom,’ he ‘can share everything. Not looking for one night stands but just love, care, respect, fidelity, emotional attachment...physical relation will be a result of these. Consummating a relation has its own importance, never saying no for it. *but definitely it will start with friendship... dates.. n if we click then further*’ (*ibid.*) (emphasis mine)

It is only within the scheme of romantic love that the paradox of putting effort and organization – the routine of *dates* as the ritualistic quest of compatibility – into something that is after all framed as happening spontaneously and unforeseeably – *if we click* – has the accuracy of experience. Romantic compatibility is always framed both as the object of excessive, banal human labour and also a gift of God.<sup>34</sup>

The individual descriptors listed above are the basic criteria for making judgments of compatibility. In talking about compatibility as the guiding principle of modern dating websites, Alia Somani makes a provocative argument about the structural similarity of ‘astrological prerequisites and caste affiliations’ on South Asian matrimonial websites with the strict ‘psychological profiling’ that is staple in websites geared towards ‘dating’ and ‘romance’. She calls each of them ‘the literal counterparts’ of the other (2009). ‘Among these [dating] websites,’ she points out, ‘*Eharmony* has perhaps the most extensive psychological testing

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<sup>34</sup> Jens, the founder of PR, told me in an email interview that ‘[t]he ‘search for the one’ is something that remains important for a lot of us. And as said before, that is not only regarding finding a ‘life partner’: it can be and also often will be a search for a person for special experiences, for a short or longer period, sex-related or not, or a search for a guide or a club or interest-group which our website provides as well. So, people don’t only search for fairy tales. Our users are much more aware of the fact that fairy tales don’t really happen...users are much more cautious. When you meet someone outside, you’ll know quite instantly if it clicks or not. When you want to meet people online, you need to set some criteria. *Next to your fact-based stats and rigid information about someone’s life and physical appearance, our users need to factor in other parameters too, more vague ones. Chemistry is one of them. It’s also a good built-in exit strategy, some users look great on paper but when you finally meet them in person, there is no magic. In that case you can simply say, ‘Sorry, there is no chemistry’.* Our users are aware of the restraints of internet dating. And, for some people, having a profile on PR takes a lot less effort than going out to bars and clubs every night’ (Jens; prsnl email: Feb 20, 2010, emphasis mine).

process. In order to register for the site, users are compelled to take a personality test, which the website claims is based on 'scientific' research concerning heterosexual couples' (*ibid.*). The website 'categorizes those who register for the service, and tells them with whom they are compatible' (*ibid.*). Such rigorous, secular tests of compatibility, Somani hints, might themselves approximate 'a singular absence of real choice' (*ibid.*), an absence that is more visibly obvious in astrological match-making and caste-based marriages.

Michael Hardt can be seen as elaborating on Somani's provocative argument of 'compatibility' as covertly limiting the field of choice, on the contrivance of the figure of the 'most compatible' as advertized on dating websites. In the same lecture cited above, Hardt talked about five different ways in the modern period in which love has been foiled from attaining its 'radical potential', from functioning as a 'political concept', as 'a field of training for constructing a more democratic society' (Hardt *ibid.*). One of these is the repeated distillation of the concept of love as an 'identitarian concept' (*ibid.*), that is, love as essentially the love of the same.

This identitarian concept appeals to the 'very limited notions of the love of neighbor but,' Hardt thinks 'the most common notions of the love of neighbor, as the love of those closest to you' (*ibid.*) whether socially, geographically, racially or physically. The concept of romantic love, as driven by the wonder-word of compatibility, is a form that often lends itself to be framed as the love of the same. A form that broaches only the familiar and is resistant to forms of newness, whether it is newness of behavior, interests, class, body, caste, language or political stands. 'I M LOOKING FOR FRNDS n Person with similar background' (Manifor4, Chandigarh; PR). 'Looking for someone with similar interests' (samsonite555, Trivandrum, Kerala; PR). 'Dude My frnd should be very very hygienic just like me' (sam\_sanu, Cochin, Kerala; PR). '...lookin for someone



likeminded & who likes to live life to the fullest...just like me' (mlrguy, Mangalore, Karnataka; PR). 'Tiger Looking for another Tiger' (horny\_tiger, Bombay; PR).

These are tentative pointers for the search for love *as* the search of the similar. These, however, are also indicative of a larger trend where websites like PR become private, targeted tools for getting at a more *defined* version of the desirable. The proxy time/space of the internet allows users to elaborate, even harden, what they desire and what they hate. What is at work here is the current major role of the internet – as an extension of the service sector market, a way of providing individualized services to customers, meeting specific demands of each user (Sassen: 2000). User-profiles are after all *custom-made* texts. They are driven by the key word of *choice*. This trend manages to skirt 'uncomfortable' differences, which are more frequent and unavoidable in unorganized, physical cruising sites like parks and public loos (Seabrook: 1999). These differences might be of language; 'If there is one thing i can't tolerate, it's WRONG ENGLISH!...I can be rude , insensitive , sarcastic depending upon the level to which you irritate me...check your grammar before you message me' (spicy\_twink0, Chennai, Tamil Nadu; PR). They might be of body-type; 'I am too cute too fair sexy gym toned body. I want some one hunky Masculine Guy only...I just cant go with Feminine/Chubby/Shapeless guys. Pls dont messege me if you are like that' (Sexysammy4u, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh; PR). The differences could also be effected through the favourite word-concept of the Indian newspaper matrimonials – 'decent'. It involves a battery of social criteria like class, educational background and lucrativeness of career; 'hi I am decent smart well educated guy i love to have very decent cool guys to keep in touch' (vivekrai, Bangalore; PR)). Individualized thus as user-profiles, the tendency can be to encounter only the familiar, aspects one has already encountered in oneself.

This makes sense in the more recent services-oriented form of the internet (Sassen: *ibid.*). It is, in a larger sense, the rejection of the figure of the dissimilar, the strange and the distant.

**(vi-a) A Small Note on the Jostling Repertoires of Love: The Case of the *Ghazal***

‘I too could recall moonlit roofs, those nights of wine--  
But Time has shelved them now in Memory's dimmed places...  
World, should Ghalib keep weeping you will see a flood  
drown your terraced cities, your marble palaces.’ (Agha Shahid Ali, ‘Not All, Only a Few Return’, 2009)

If romantic love is framed as a narrative of first discovering mutual compatibility and then praying that it lasts, even as one *works* on the relationship, then surely expressions of love that do not adhere to this narrative impulse or those which interrupt its flow must have an ambiguous relationship with it. Like the secular and the sacred aspects of love that constantly intrude upon each other, the modern narrative of romance always has to jostle with the non-narrative expressions of love, such as the *ghazal*.

The form of the *ghazal* from the Urdu poetic repertoire lends itself to heavy situational quotations within PR user profiles. Yayati from Bombay who is 45 years old enjoys ‘reading widely, travel, long solitary walks, good friends who are gregarious,’ and ‘classical and old Hindi film music’ (PR). He believes he is ‘sincere and honest’ in his ‘relations with friends’ and enjoys ‘healthy and safe sex with men willing to explore desire and passion...I hope to find some decent men willing to shed their inhibitions as much as their pants’ (*ibid.*). In his bid to find men willing to share such moments of ‘desire and passion’ he quotes excessively from Ghalib (1797-1869), the nineteenth century Delhi’s Urdu poet, whose *ghazals* have been widely diffused in forms of Indian popular culture such as the ‘classical and old Hindi film music’ that Yayati likes:

'Koi mere dil se pooche tere teere neemkash ko  
Yeh khalish kahaan se hoti, jo jigar ke paar hota  
[Ask my heart about thy half drawn arrow,  
Where would the pain come from, had it seared my heart]' (quoted in Yayati; PR)

I want to suggest that there might be a crucial relation between Yayati's desires and the forms that he employs to accomplish them. His craving is to enjoy men, desirous and passionate, willing to shed their forms of embeddedness, whether social ('inhibitions') or literal ('pants'). His is a desire for a series of high moments of pleasure with different men, not a singular romantic plot of love for one. I want to ask whether it is purely coincidental that he quotes the form of the *ghazal* or does the *ghazal* lend itself peculiarly to the expression of his desires.

Different repertoires of love invoke different expectations, situations and characters. They facilitate different circumstances of affection. In writing about the 'range of idioms and images of love' in the English and Hindi/Urdu manuals of love-letters for men and women that she found on the footpaths in North India, Francesca Orsini seems to find a recognizable difference in the spheres and ways of loving invoked by the use of different languages. 'English,' she says, arguing tentatively for those love-letter manuals, 'indicates one's willingness to participate in the game of romantic love and/or of individual advancement, independence and career orientation' (Orsini; 2006: 241). 'Urdu,' however 'indicates either a highly romantic nature or seduction and is delinked from marriage and family' (*ibid.*).

'The English booklet *Love Letters*, compiled by 'Rajesh' (Delhi, 1995) is one of a 'Do's and Dont's General Books of Everyday Use' which includes those on babycare, pregnancy, yoga, guests and parties, honeymoon, diseases, neighbours, money, examination and interview, servants and relatives. Love is thus recognized as one of life's areas of experience about which one needs to have *practical* knowledge' (*ibid.* 242) (emphasis in original)

It is, here, deeply embedded in the dailiness of experiencing marriage and family – the romantic relationship never simply lasts by itself, you always have to work with it. ‘Literariness,’ staple of Urdu letters, ‘by comparison, plays a less important role’ (244). ‘Earnestness means earnestness of *feeling* (‘true love’) and earnestness of *intentions* (love leading to marriage)’ (*ibid.*).

Yayati is looking for playful men outside the setup of marriage, or at any rate, he seeks to temporarily draw them out. He seeks to seduce men ‘willing to explore’ and uses an idiom that is distinctly *unpractical* as advice on long term romance or familial matters, but eminently serviceable as a device of immediate, teasing seduction. The form of the *ghazal* has the wholeness of mood or feeling – a *ghazal* can variously rest on jealousy, hope, desire, despair, pain, seduction – but it never has a narrative of individual growth and achievement through causal linkages. A bildungsroman conceit would never be possible within the ‘two-line universe’ of the *ghazal* that is composed of autonomous couplets that, except the first and last, can be quoted in whichever order (Pritchett quoted in Orsini; 2006: 18).

Defying narrative, the *ghazal* in a sense is the moment of desire itself. The beloved becomes an object of endless play rather than a staged quest. The conventional *ghazal* is suspended in a timeless universe of dazzlement on the verge of the appearance of the beloved. It stages a continual delight and suffering at the beloved’s hand. It loops an incessant game of seduction, of arrows half-drawn to pierce hearts, hunters preying on innocents, suicides being contemplated and the lover’s enthrallment and wounds perpetually deepening. Kashmiri-american poet Agha Shahid Ali understood this formal element of timelessness in the *ghazal* well enough to describe Ghalib’s tears as perpetual; *World, should Ghalib keep weeping you will see a flood.*

This timelessness is crucial, it skirts narrative. The sight of the beloved, common in the *ghazal*, is an experience of utter mesmerization, but crucially enough, this experience never projects onto a distinct possibility of the beloved's attainment, or a shared future with him. In other words, it is not the instrumental *love at first sight* of romance. Not a grasping of interior qualities, but instead a more frontal enthrallment by sheer sight; 'unkey dekhey sey jo aajaatee hai munh par raunak / voh samajhtey hain ki beemaar ka haal achchhaa hai [As my face lights up when I set eyes upon him / He thinks my illness has passed, I must be better]' (Ghalib, tr. Khushwant Singh; 2007: 60-1).

Yayati is, in his own words, looking for 'men willing to explore desire and passion', not for one to set up house with. The *ghazal* for him works as a bit of an inveiglement. It lures the other but not into an everlasting union. It scripts episodes with others but not a shared story. This resonates with the form of the *ghazal* where separation does not simply lead to union, but instead, these two states of being are relentlessly exchanged with each other. This repeated exchange foregrounds the provisional 'I,' of the Urdu *ghazal*, as an active placeholder of these elaborate states of feeling, not as a novel character developing with the passage of connected situations (Mufti; 2004: 247). This provisional 'I' of the *ghazal* – seductive, desirous, fleeting – is more lucrative for Yayati's aims than the developmental 'I' of romantic love.

Modern narratives of romantic love, however, are insistent. They try to incorporate the *ghazal* in at least three distinct ways: as evocative quotations that interpret romance, as ironic or unpractical, campy intrusions, and as museumized Urdu remnants within an aspirationally English language universe. This incorporation is never full and the *ghazal* continues to place the romantic strain in relief by underlining its necessary contradictions.

tanhayi, a 22 year old from Jaipur, Rajasthan, is ‘looking for someone special someone that could recolor,’ his ‘life from Blue to rainbows’; it’s ‘not easy,’ he says ‘being single since birth...you can’t hide the fact that your insecure to anyone who has been in a romantic relationship...ehehehe..’ (PR). This insecurity is elaborated in two poetic gestures that form the rest of his profile. It is uncertain whether he quotes or authors it, but the *ghazal* here becomes useful as *a device of consolation* in the face of the high romantic dream and as *a key to the necessary uncertainty* that is at the heart of the search and sustenance of the romance narrative. In other words, the *ghazal* reads between the lines of romantic love:

‘chup rehtein hai koi khafa na ho jaye, / hamari wajah se koi rusva na ho jaye, / saanse chalti hain jis ummid ka daman thaam ke, / kahin woh daaman bhi hum se juda na ho jaye... / Likhi hai yeh ghazal sirf tere liye / Dewane bane bhi to sirf tere liye [‘I stay silent for he might get angry if I speak, / because of me, he might be pained, / He, on whose trust and hope, I breathe / What if he parts from me... / I write this ghazal only for you / I am enthralled only by you’]’ (PR)

The *ghazal* becomes an utterance that at once soothes the subject of romance and educates him in the inconsistencies implicit in this narrative. As a form it becomes useful to romance by simultaneously making sense of the deep captivation at the hands of the beloved – ‘Har pyar se pyare lagte ho tum mujhe [You are more lovable than every other love]’ (tanhayi, PR) – and also understanding the necessary fear of loss that this captivation entails once it is enclosed in a prolonged narrative – ‘kisi ko itna apna na bana / ki use khone ka dar laga rahe [‘don’t make someone so much your own / that you might forever fear his parting’]’ (tanhayi; PR).

The *ghazal* is also often censured on PR as *things that are too poetic* – poetic here understood as hyperbolic, unpractical and outside the alleged realism of self-help or newspaper advice columns on romance and sex with one’s partner. ‘I used to be a poet. I’ve learnt to be more intelligent and practical now,’ raremoments from Kolkata writes, and continues on his romantic

search for ‘intelligent, smart, goodlooking, educated, communicative, conversant...preferably slim and sexy’ men. For dontbugmee from Delhi, who is 34 and a ‘die hard romantic...deep-down inside’ and ‘yearn[s] for permanency...someone to wake up with every morning and do a little nok-jhonk [bickering] about the breakfast/dinner menu, about who messed up the room etc.’, the *ghazal* becomes an altogether obsolete form, unsuitable to the ‘business’ of romantic love. He frames other people’s usage of the form as interruptive and campy, as a bit of a hopeless joke: ‘Sorry, no enticing poetry, sher-o-shayree [couplets] or boring blogs for introductions! Let me get right to business!’ (PR) The *ghazal*, as evidenced on PR, is at once a strong cultural citation and a pushy remainder that meddles with other languages of love. It is at once a campy efflux and a long-standing non-narrative device plotted oddly with romantic love to make sense of its contradictions. As a form, it is both futile and key to this matter of love.

### **(vii) The Friend**

Related figures: the lover, the *yaar* (buddy), the *dost*, the *mitr*, the *mast* (playful), the sentimental, the companion, the gay

‘Friendship is not about “I m sorry “its about “abbe teri galti hai [Damn, it’s all your fault]“ / Friendship is not about “I m there for u” or “I missed u “ it’s about “kahan marr gaya saale [Where the hell have you been, dog?]“ / Friendship is not about “I understand “ its about “sab teri wajah se hua manhus [This is all because of you, fucker]“ / Friendship is not about “I care for u “ its about “kamino tumhe chhod ke kahan jaunga [Where else will I go if I leave you buggers]“ / Friendship is not about “I love that girl“ its about “saalo izzat se dekho tumhari bhabhi hain [Look at her with respect, she’s your sister-in-law]” (Mystic\_Aswad, Bangalore; PR)

'I am bisexual and not looking for relations or gay life partner neither interested in gay marriage don't want to spend life with male. So guys if you are looking for same then I am sorry I am not for you...Guys who are open minded, frank and modern, like good friendship and interested in man to man sex are most welcome...Place for sex : No (Living with family, even can't arrange)' (mittrr, Faridabad; PR)

'hi...dear i am...from raipur 23y,fair,hot and sexy ,i am bisexual, live in sunder nagar, i want some good soul boys for true and long friend ship. i come hear not for only sex but emotional touch is much important for me . i have deep faith on my god. i am an engineer...if you intrested with me pls contact with me...i am waiting for you...m here for friendship & relationship...m searching here trusted & honest guy...m here also for fun & masti [play]' (Arora, Raipur, Chattisgarh, PR)

'[I]f you also thought u wana be my friend then u always welcome. / i wanna only good human being as my friend later see where we stand. and yes u can trust me i can prove myself ur best friend . / THIS SONG IS / FOR MY LOVE / chaha hai tujko chahegaye hardum mar k bhi tujhse yeh pyar na hoga kam :) [I have always loved you, I will always love you, even if I die, my love for you would not lessen] / FOR MY FRIENDSHIP / As i don't leave u alone in middle of life when u need good friend or when u need sme with u i am always with u / yaar mangyasi rabhaa teko roke, kyari mey khudaayi mang lai. pyar mera kar rabha mere hawale, yaar bina dil mera konn sambhaley [I cried and asked for a friend, God, did I ask for the entire universe? / give my love to me, God, without my friend, who else would shelter my heart]' (sweets4u, Delhi; PR)

In the last decade, male friendship in Bombay cinema has been grist to the mill of new queer scholarship on film. The 'continuous tradition' in Bombay cinema of 'framing narratives with the love of two friends' has newly shifted under the academic lens to be mined for innovative interpretations of relations between men on screen (Ghosh; 2002: 208). One of the commonplaces of this scholarship is that 'buddy films can be read as evocative of homoerotic love, suggested through overlapping boundaries between love and friendship' (*ibid.*).

Ruth Vanita, in writing about *Dosti* [Friendship] (1964, Dir. Satyen Bose) and *Tamanna* (1998, Dir. Mahesh Bhatt) reads their film-scripts for five pointers concerning male-male relationships. These are 'primacy, exclusivity, duration (these operate on the narrative level [how much of the



relationship is seen on screen, and for how long]), intensity (this operates on the lyric level [how evocatively it is shown]), and the demonstration of moral worth (this operates on the socioethical level [is it offered as an ideal])' (Vanita; 2002: 149). Judged with these five criteria, both films are read by her as 'legitimiz[ing], even celebrat[ing], same-sex love' among men (157). Ghosh calls *Dosti* a 'buddy melodrama' (*ibid.*).

In *Dosti*, young male actors Sudhir Kumar (Mohan) and Sushil Kumar (Ramu) come to occupy the same 'diegetic space conventionally occupied by heterosexual couples,' (Ghosh *ibid.*) the 'story of passionate friendship is narrated through established tropes of romance, separation, and eventual reconciliation' (*ibid.*). In the formal absence of overt sexual depiction on the 1960s Bombay screen, both cross-sex love and same-sex friendship are represented through the formulaic singing of songs of happiness or separation, the repeated scenes of caresses and embraces, the melodramatic appeal to sentimentality in screen dialogue and relations, and a script stretched between enthrallment, severance and reunion (Ghosh: 208; Vanita: 147). For the climax of *Dosti*, the elder female figure in the film script, Mausi, blesses Ramu and Mohan. The blessing of the elderly is a diegetic placeholder for the man-woman romantic pair, its moral pivot, and makes for a good climactic moment on screen. Here it is seen as already *unselfconsciously* extended to the male friends: 'Bhagwan kare tumhari jodi isi tarah bani rahe [May God always protect your pair]' (quoted in Vanita: 154).

In the film songs for *Dosti* written by Urdu poet Majrooh Sultanpuri (1922-2000) – who was a disciple of North Indian poet Jigar Moradabadi (1890-1960) and was steeped in the traditions of the Urdu *ghazal* and the gender vagueness of the figure of the lyrical beloved – 'love and friendship figure as inseparable: '[i]f friendship is the brother, the sister is love [dosti hai bhai,

to behna hai pyar]” (*ibid.*). Framed within the cinematic genre that foregrounded sentiment over sex, the content of friendship is seen *as* the content of love: ‘Koyi jub rah na paaye / Mere sang aaye / Ke pag pag deep jalaaye / Meri dosti mera pyar [When you find no way / come with me / with every step we shall light a lamp / My friendship, my love]’ (Sultanpuri: 1964).

Readings of male friendship in Bombay cinema, such as Vanita’s and Ghosh’s are often explicitly organized by the frame metaphor of the continuum. Vanita says that is interested in ‘the continuum between romantic friendship and love, the slippery space where affection [between men] slides into or is coded as the erotic without being overtly depicted as sexual’ (146). Such a ‘continuum,’ she argues, ‘is evident in the name of India’s longest running gay magazine *Bombay Dost (Bombay Friend)*, founded in 1990’ (*ibid.*). One of the main sub-sections in her essay is titled: ‘Love, Sex, Marriage and Friendship: The Slippery Continuum’ (*ibid.*). What in Ghosh’s words were the ‘overlapping boundaries between [male] love and friendship’ could be easily subsumed by interpretive metaphors like Vanita’s continuum.

I would argue – using the contents and the conceits of PR user profiles – that the continuum is too easy an analytic. It is provocative but rarely productive. It is too smooth a metaphor to be able to understand those discrepancies between specific situations of male ‘*love, sex, marriage and friendship*’ that never simply *slip* or *slide* into each other. It is too glib a frame for a far more complex and exciting study that Ghosh and Vanita actually do – looking at narrative strategies, screen-time allocation, song conventions, cinematic traditions of sentimentality, on-screen absence of sexual explicitness, each of which are not adequately explained by this metaphor of the continuum. The metaphor is very useful in so far as it claims the radical proximity – a proximity that is both ethnographic (on ground) and emblematic (on cinema) – of the different

situations of intimacy between men, whether it is friendship, love or sex. However, it is too slick to point out the leaps, the interruptions, the symbolic breakages that happen between these different situations. The problem with the frame of the continuum is that it is too continuous.

The idea of the *continuum between same-sex love and friendship* has had a contested history from its first major articulation within the fold of gay and lesbian studies. The history of this academic discipline through the 1990s and this last decade in Europe and the U.S. has been checkered with references to Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980), the essay in which she first launched this metaphor. Vanita, who is a professor at the University of Montana, the northwestern American state, and Ghosh who both studied at Cornell and regularly tours Euro-American universities as visiting professor are part of the inevitable traffic of this concept of the *continuum* across regional contexts and its renewed deployments. They inherit the creativity of this concept as well as its confusions.

Writing a letter to Adrienne Rich from New York City in April 1981, the editors of the book that published Rich's essay that had already appeared in the journal *Signs* a year back, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, all Marxist-feminist scholars, told Rich:

'[w]e know you are a poet, not an historian, and we look forward to reading your metaphors all our lives—and standing straighter as feminists, as women, for having read them. But the metaphor of the lesbian continuum is open to all kinds of misunderstandings, and these sometimes have odd political effects' (quoted in Rich: 2003).

They reported that 'at a recent meeting around the abortion-rights struggle, the notion of continuum arose in the discussion several times and underwent divisive transformation,' and

'[o]verall, the notion that two ways of being existed on the same continuum was interpreted to mean that those two ways were the same. The sense of range and gradation that your description evokes disappeared. Lesbianism and female friendship became exactly the same thing. Similarly, heterosexuality and rape became the same' (*ibid.*)

In her reply from Massachusetts in November that same year, Rich relented that her concept 'can be misused' and that what she 'had thought to delineate rather complexly as a continuum has begun to sound more like *life-style shopping*' (*ibid.*). Her very phrase *lesbian continuum* had come

'from a desire to allow for the greatest possible variation of female-identified experience, while paying a different kind of respect to lesbian existence – the traces and knowledge of women who have made their primary erotic and emotional choices for women' (*ibid.*)

For Rich, the role of the lesbian continuum was two-fold. Firstly, it ably skirted the problem word which was *lesbian* itself. Rich said 'has a clinical and limiting ring' and is often tamed as just another 'life-style'. Secondly, it established a broader platform for feminist politics. It expanded the bases of support – emotional, practical, political, erotic – between and among women. Rich revised the terms of the 'erotic' in order to gear it towards feminist political ends, understanding it as

'that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,' and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which 'makes us less willing to accept powerlessness'' (*ibid.*)

The diffusion of the terms of the erotic, now newly understood 'in female terms,' and reading it as implicit in all 'female friendship and comradeship' was Rich's keen political strategy and her vision of a more inclusive feminist practice. It was 'a conscious restructuring of feminist analysis and criticism, not just a token reference or two' to the lesbian (*ibid.*). The idea of the continuum was about political vision before it was about sociological precision.

Nor was Rich's continuum ever conceptualized as a stretched spectrum between two standalone points of lesbianism and female heterosexuality. In fact much of what expressed itself as unequivocally *lesbian* – lesbian separatist politics, Colette's erotic writings, and

lesbianism as an optional lifestyle – jarred with Rich’s continuum and seemed to overflow its otherwise inclusive frame. They interrupted the continuity of Rich’s metaphor.

The French novelist ‘Colette [1873-1954],’ Rich thought, despite her reputation as a ‘lesbian writer,’ and precisely because of this reputation, is ‘a less reliable source on the lesbian continuum than,’ she thinks, the English novelist ‘Charlotte Brontë [1816-1855]. Rich argued that Brontë ‘understood that while women may, indeed must, be one another’s allies, mentors, and comforters in the female struggle for survival,’ they always find a ‘quite extraneous delight in each other’s company and attraction,’ unlike Colette, who just ‘writes about lesbian existence as if for a male audience’ (*ibid.*). Colette’s ‘earliest ‘lesbian’ novels, the Claudine series’ Rich reports, ‘were written under compulsion for her husband and published under both their names’ (*ibid.*). Colette’s texts do not abide by the political vision of Rich’s lesbian continuum.

Judged on the same basis, Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* (1973) and Meridel LeSueur’s *The Girl* (1978), with their depiction of the ‘diffusion and frustration of female bonding’ and the ‘competition of heterosexual compulsion for women’s attention’ come to better examine and embody this continuum than do, Rich claims, in sheer contrast, those ‘shallow or sensational ‘lesbian scenes’ in recent commercial fiction’ (*ibid.*).

The commercial, the bluntly erotic (or in Rich’s terms, the ‘pornographic’) and the lifestyle lesbian are not valid enough as political feminist subjects to be plotted onto her continuum. They exceed it, and more, they spoil it. This latter kind of lesbian, then, is differentiated from Rich’s continuum, and more crucially, always remains differentiable from it. This lesbian symbolically breaks the continuum and is the undissolved precipitate at the end of Rich’s political experiment. ‘[F]or lesbian existence to realize this political content in an ultimately

liberating form,' Rich writes, 'the erotic choice *must* deepen and expand into conscious woman identification - into lesbian feminism' (*ibid.*) (emphasis mine). All that cannot 'deepen and expand', that is, cannot become politically useful, is the remainder to the continuum, something indivisible, something it does not include or explain. *The effect of continuity in the metaphor is sustained precisely by having remainders.*

My first premise is that Rich's *continuum as feminist political strategy* cannot be simply imported as Vanita's (or even Ghosh's) *continuum as analytic frame for male friendships on screen* or on ground. The former – being a political vision – was never equipped to deal with and produce exhaustive accounts of the specific contexts of male or female friendship and love – Euro-American or South Asian, in film or in day to day life. It was after all, as visionary politics is usually articulated, hopelessly universal; Rich's continuum itself extended 'through each woman's life and throughout history' (*ibid.*).

My second premise is that any use of this frame of the continuum should brace itself for the remainders that it will not explain. We should not use the idea only for the predictable and the politically cheerful prospect of *proving* that same-sex relations have always been present and represented in 'traditionally homosocial' worlds, such as South Asia, thus triggering queer revisionary readings of practically every text of the distant or recent past. Beyond this, when we use the 'continuum' we should be ready for the volume of undissolved precipitates in the regions and the texts that we study, of ways of relating that just do not *slide* into each other, that resist the flow. Of intimacies that become differentiable, that cannot be housed in our metaphor. This will prepare to understand the contradictions between the many concepts of same-sex love and friendship that are not entirely soluble in each other, of intimacies that

frequently *do* reach crisis points in their definition, and of popular practices of male fucking and fun that do not coherently continue into male emotion or togetherness, or for that matter, into 'gay' lives. The figure of the friend will make sense only on such a disjointed continuum.

For mitrr (*mitr* is Hindi for friend), quoted in the section epigraph, 35 years old, 'bisexual', married to a woman and in Faridabad, the search is for '[g]uys who are open-minded, frank and modern,' who 'like good friendship,' and are 'interested in man to man sex' (PR). mitrr's wishes could easily be framed within a continuum where 'friendship' and 'man to man sex' pose no contradictions for each other, are said in the same breath, look like they slip into each other. However, mitrr's wishes are full of distinctions, of breakage points, of specific associations of sex and not others. He explicitly distinguishes his search. He avoids it from being mistaken for a search for 'relations or gay life partner,' he is 'neither interested in gay marriage,' nor does he 'want to spend life with male' (PR). *He brackets out from friendship the time that is implicit in the modern concept of romance.* This gesture is crucial to his 'frank' and 'modern' scheme.

For mitrr in Faridabad, 'modern' friendship works as a mode of spending time with another man, a time which involves sex, but one which does not stretch out these moments of sex into a *living together*. Friendship understood as being *in excess of* the duty of marriage, as something which is *outside* the main romantic relationship with a 'life partner'. Friendship does not comprise the time that is to be shared for life, not the time that visibly constitutes a romantic relationship. Friendship understood as a different temporal equation. One that would never treat time spent with a friend as the *primary* expenditure of one's time or social duties. sweethart4u from Bombay works with this modern idea of *secondariness* of friendship when he goes about 'looking for friendship first and if things work out we can take it to *next step*' (PR)

(emphasis mine).<sup>35</sup> Friendship as something *prior* to romance, something differentiable from it by being understood as its doorway, one that is transformed into romantic love by a symbolic *step*.

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<sup>35</sup> This 'modern idea of the *secondariness* of friendship' is also precisely the notional secondariness that is accorded to male friendship in comparison to the idea of male-female romantic marriage. In her remarkable work *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, Afsaneh Najmabadi found that in 'the nineteenth century, homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran [in the eyes of Europe and of much of its own educated elite] as backward; heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of "achieving modernity," a project that called for heterosocialization of public space...a reconfiguration of family life...[and a] feminization of the category "beloved"' (2005: 3-7). Significantly, the early Iranian feminist 'marriage bargain' was complicit in this; this heterosocialization was its 'burden of birth' (174, 232). 'Once marriage...[came to be seen as] a romantic contract, the exchange was presumably mutually even [between women and men]...[t]he "object of exchange" was now love, companionship, and mutual attendance to each other's desires and needs', in other words, the primary expenditure of one's time and affects (*ibid.*). This romantic plot, which is evident in India as well (after Bankim, after Tagore et. al.) and its corollary of heterosocialization which was evident (after Hali, after Syed Ahmed Khan et. al.) made a demand, in Najmabadi's words, of the modern men to make a 'heterosocial promise' (175). This was seen to be crucial within the 'project of women's emancipation', '[w]omen haggled over the terms of [this] promise, demanding that men desexualize *their* homosociality: if you want a loving companionate wife, stop fooling around with young men and boys. Bibi Khanum Astarabadi's *Vices of Men* (1894) considered older man-younger man sexual liaisons (*amradbazi*) both a major male vice and more significantly, a vice that disrupted the companionate marital relationship' (176). Whereas Najmabadi uses the histories of male homoeroticism in Iran to alert 'feminist historiography' to the 'important task' of re-membering, of bringing 'back into national belonging' figures of male (and female) homoeroticism and figures of gender playfulness, to be avowed within the 'modern national' (243), for our immediate argument about the figure of the 'friend', her history recounts an iconic moment of deprioritization of the (male) 'friend', hesitantly in practice but more in modern symbolization, in comparison to the female 'lover'. This deprioritization, however, was not complete. Even early Iranian feminists realized this. '[T]ransferring one's affective bonds from the world of mother to the beloved husband...[was not without risks]...To put all one's affective eggs,' Najmabadi writes, 'in one man's basket was extremely risky, for men advocated the romanticization of marriage without relinquishing the prerogatives of a procreative sexual contract. They wished to keep (and in most Islamic countries continue to do so) their prerogatives to be polygynous and to divorce at will. They would continue to prioritize their male-male friendships, which now found an additional layer of affective meanings through the reinscription of homoerotic love as patriotic love. Sons of homeland could now claim new



The Lebanese-American writer Khalil Gibran (d. 1931) countered this mode of spending time that was implicit in the modern idea of friendship, writing: 'And let your best be for your friend...For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill? / Seek him always with hours to live' (1923, 2006: 26). In mittrr's case, male friendship breaks the symbolic continuum by this notional *secondariness* to the romantic relationship with a girl. He makes the *secondariness* in the idea of friendship do a specific work for him. Notionally remaining a satellite to the *chief* social bond of the romantic relationship, for which he has a *place*, a home, a marriage, it gets him the fun of sex with men. Friendship as discontinuous with romantic fidelity, as plotted on a different timeline of fun, as premised on a greater social mobility of men outside marriage.

I could also read the general search for friendship or *dosti* as laced with a covert intention, with irony. As a strategic cover or a euphemism for the search of romantic love in another man outside his marriage - friendship of men with men as a convenient social lie for love between them. There are reasons to do this. After all, even mittrr's profile goes on to define him as 'fun loving, down to earth, decent, well educated guy' and as looking for 'decent and good-looking guys for friendship' (PR). Later he elaborates on his height, interests, favorite movies, dislikes, allergies, sex positions *et. al.*, implying that his brand of 'friendship' is made up of the same building-blocks of compatibility that also prop up romantic love. However this lie works in interesting ways. The lie itself is a proof of the fact that the social continuum between friendship and love is a bit of a myth. That male friendship can be used as a cover means its

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affective bonds as patriotic brother-citizens' (175). The figure of the friend, thus, as can be seen in Najmabadi and in my own study, has a long and haphazard history of contestation with the connected figure of the romantic lover.

general social meanings must already be discontinuous with that of romance or marriage with the opposite sex. This discontinuity is the basis of the lie. The lie is the disjoint in the continuum, its tear and stress.

Arora, 24 years old and from Raipur, is looking for 'friendship & relationship' (PR). The ampersand, the crucial conjunction brings 'friendship' and 'relationship' very near and yet accords difference. It is precisely due to this twofold search that he can more easily infuse the concept of male friendship with narrative length, emotional content, and the deeper characterization peculiar to the loved one in modern romance. He wants 'good soul boys for true and long friendship...not only for sex but emotional touch'. He brings together the criteria regular in romantic love and in friendship by searching for a 'trusted & honest guy' and also 'for fun & masti [play]' respectively (PR). sweets4u, 23 years old and from Delhi, who has separate songs dedicated to his potential lover and to his potential friends, rests on the different temporalities implicit in friendship and in love, saying 'if you also thought u wana be my friend then u always welcome, but / yes if i make relationship i be only for my lover till my life' (PR). Although the Punjabi film song he pledges for his future friends uses the words 'pyar' (love, lover) and 'yaar' (friend, lover) almost interchangeably ('Yaar mangiyasi', Anand Raj Anand in film *Kaante*; 2002), sweets4u has different working meanings of the terms on ground.

The friend, in the modern idea of the romantic relationship, is always a satellite to the primary loved companion. He inhabits the interstices of the time spent with the lover. Several men who are looking for men on PR are participants in this schema. Some PR users distinguish between their female partners and male friends (the premise of the lie to the wife for male sex and intimacy outside marriage). More interestingly, others explicitly distinguish between their male

partners and male friends. This distinction is implied within romantic love. It resists the range of the idiom of friendship, tries to cast the figure of the friend in narrower, asexual terms. On PR, a 'gay dating' website founded at the turn of the century, there is no concept of the friend, of *dosti* that is simply prior to its engagement with the concept of romance. These concepts already engage and spoil each other. The *lover* already has some bearing on the *friend*.

The accommodating bandwidth of male homosocial friendship – usually studied in South Asian queer scholarship (Vanita: 2002; Ghosh: 2002), one that allows love within the guise of buddy camaraderie, allows male friendship as *dosti* or *yaari* to be experienced as a series of intimacies considered given within man-woman love or marriage, as almost continuous with it – that bandwidth both asserts itself on PR but is also foiled within it. It is foiled as men themselves tentatively distinguish between their lovers and friends, between a generic *lover* and *friend*. This distinction is the cornerstone of the modern model of romance, its primary way of arranging relationships between people. The popularity of the model of romance hampers the bandwidth – already discontinuous – of experiences capable within South Asian male friendships. The modern continuum between male friendship and male love then is experienced only as a series of crisis points – whether as lies, as *next steps* or as shifting boundaries of what is done among friends. We now look at *masti* as one of these crisis-points.

#### **(vii-a) A Small Note on the Jostling Repertoires of Friendship: The Case of *Masti***

'In February of 1999...a "conference of gays in the country," entitled Yaarian 1999 ['Yaar' crudely translates as 'male friend'], was held in Hyderabad. One of the self-conscious aims of this conference was to 'try and identify an indigenous, or desi, terminology for the concept of gay' (Gayatri Reddy; 2006: 218)

"सुबह शिवराज कि आँखें खुलीं तो देखा सरनामसिंह उसीकी चारपाई पर पड़ा है और उसका एक

हों थी...कभी सरनाम उसे बदहवास कि तरह बाहों में दबोच लेता

बालों में अपना मूँह गड़ाकर लम्बी सांसें खींचता। ठोड़ी उठाकर कहता - 'मेरी तरफ देखो।'...और शिवराज इसी सोच में पड़ा रह जाता कि आखिर यह स्नेह यह प्यार कैसा होता , इसमें दुर्गन्ध क्यों आती है? इसकी

*किस बिंदु के बाद यह सड़ने लगता है, वह कहाँ तक इसे स्वीकार करे,* -

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['When Shivraj woke up he found out that Sarnaam Singh was lying

with him on his charpoy and his hand was on his chest. This was no new thing...Sometimes Sarnaam Singh used to crazedly hold him tight in his arms. He used to bury his face in his hair and take long and deep breaths. Used to lift his chin and say – 'Look at me.'...And Shivraj was just left thinking about what sort of love this is, why does it give off a stench? Where is its boundary? *After what precise point does it start to rot?* How much of it should he accept, where should he draw a line? Each day these thoughts arise and disperse' (Kamleshwar, 1956, 1979: 30-1) (emphasis mine)

'hello friends how are u guys m here for masti n fun with nice happening guys m put up in west delhi without place' (saurabhg, Delhi; PR). 'i am fun loving guy down to earth want to spend good times with friends and share feelings not too much hanky panky and lots of fun outing movies and masti long ride holding each other' (rohit\_arzoo, Bhubhaneswar, Orissa; PR). 'Hi Its Arun...welcome to my World...its full of fun n masti' (Hi\_Arun, Jorhat, Assam; PR). 'all m2m/gay sex liking r welcome 4 fun n masti.hav gay life sex with ur boy friend.enjoy day n night whole life.its so gud n sexy' (amirraja, Brahmapur, Orissa; PR).

In the vocabulary of Urdu-Sufi poetry, *mast* was the state of the poet in deep enthrallment or devotion. *Mast* implied at once an experience of ecstasy, a figure of intoxication and the pinnacle of pleasure. To be *mast* was to step out of the ordinary equilibrium of day to day life, to lose all control and surrender oneself to the composite figure of the divine and the beloved. North Indian Urdu poet Jigar Moradabadi (1890-1960), along with two other poets Abdul

Hameed Adam and Anwar Jogi, elaborate this meaning of *masti* in the song made famous by the voice of Pakistani Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948-97): 'Saaraa jahaan mast, jahaan kaa nizaam mast / Din mast, raat mast, saher mast, shaam mast / Mast shiisha, mast subuu, mast jaam mast / Hai terii chashm-e-mast se har Khaas-o-aam mast [The whole world is ecstatic, the order of the world is ecstatic / The day is ecstatic, so is the dawn and so is evening. / The glass, cup and wine are all ecstatic / Because of your intoxicating eyes, everyone and everything is ecstatic.]' (Midas Musics: 2007).

Outside poetic conventions, *mast* was understood to be anything that was enjoyable, recreational and broke the routine patterns of familial obligations or official duty. In most PR profiles where *masti* appears, it is almost always coupled with the English word 'fun', suggesting a convergence of their meanings. Festivals and holidays are occasions par excellence for *masti*. Repeatedly visiting the North Indian city of Benares in the 1990s, the American cultural anthropologist Lawrence Cohen reported that the city had 'a reputation for having a particularly *mast* (pleasurable) Holi, or a particularly nasty one, depending on whom you ask' (1995). *Masti* is also a common umbrella term in the Hindi/Urdu belt in India for the rituals of enjoyment and play between young and male (and to a lesser extent older and female) friends. The frame of *masti* could include leisure activities – for rohit\_arzoo *masti* means 'outings,' 'movies' and 'long rides' (PR). It could also include handjobs, blowjobs or fucking, like for several men interviewed by Seabrook on the cruising grounds of Delhi in the late 1990s who used words like 'maza' (enjoyment), 'masti' (fun, play) and 'khel' (game, play) to describe what they were up to in the cruising parks.

*Masti* is the realm of play and enjoyment. It is always located in an *elsewhere* in relation to the quotidian and the obligatory. Male-male sex figures in this *elsewhere* of the space of man-woman family and marriage. It is a commonplace within the cultural ethnographies done in India in the wake of HIV-AIDS health interventions throughout the 1990s and 2000s that sexual contact between men is often framed by men not as 'sex' per se but instead as 'play' or *masti* (Khanna: 2005; Bondyopadhyay and Shah: 2007). 'Masti is a term,' Indian activists Aditya Bandyopadhyay and Vidya Shah wrote in the publication of the Naz Foundation International, an NGO working on male sexual health issues, 'used for same-sex behaviour between boys and men, in suburban and rural India. Men do have sex with each other. But it is not considered sex; it is just something you do in fun and play. People then get married and may continue to have masti later on' (Bondyopadhyay and Shah: 2007: 34).

*Masti* as the mode of male friendship can be easily romanticized, most evidently in the theory of the continuum. However, the space of *masti* is always interrupted by the dual possibilities of hierarchy and equality, rape and intimacy, violence and consent, dependency and freedom, love/friendship or its lack. Male *masti* is also most usually premised on limited female mobility in and out of the domestic household. Hindi novelist Kamleshwar's (1932-2007) character Shivraaj, sixteen years younger to bus driver Sarnaam Singh, wonders at what *point* does Sarnaam's love start to rot – at what *point* it ceases to be fun. A smooth continuum is not capable to understand the social life of *masti*. *Masti* makes sense only in a continuum that is knotted, irregular and made up of unpredictable *points*.

Lawrence Cohen noted that sex between men in North India – often locally understood in verbal pairs of doing/be done to, *karna/karwana*, eat/be eaten – has a strong presiding folkloric connection with

‘stories of being raped or seduced by a friend of one’s parents, by a real or fictive uncle, or by an employer...stories of bullying or ragging younger kids, or conversely of the sexual violence experienced by younger at the hands of older students, and more generally of sex between older and younger students in university hostels...stories of sex between officials - particularly the police - and younger men; and...stories of the famed licentiousness of the feudal landlords, or zamindars, in the rural hinterlands of the city (Bihar, east of Benares, in particular) and of their prodigious appetite for young men’ (*ibid.*)

*Masti* can indeed be the moment which Cohen hints as collapsing ‘playfulness and penetration into a single coherent desire’ but this coherence often faces interruptions (*ibid.*).<sup>36</sup> It can be riddled by shifting decisions about limits and confusions about what has passed beyond the threshold, into the excessive, into the disgraceful. At times, as Cohen suggests, *masti* teeters on the edges of the very contiguous lores of hierarchical and forced penetration, of *masti* that is

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<sup>36</sup> This tentative coherence, for instance, although of a kind achieved only when it is a ‘youthful affair’, is hinted by the Dewan of the small kingdom of ‘Chokkrapur’ in colonial India, in talking with J.R. Ackerley who, on being recommended by his friend, the author E.M. Forster, served as the Private Secretary of the Maharajah there for about five months in 1923. With a slightly obsessive, almost anthropological interest in the customs of the people there, Ackerley often engages the Dewan during his stay in conversation to that effect. The Dewan always obliges. Of one of these conversations, Ackerley writes in his 1932 memoir *Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal*, that the Dewan and he ‘passed from that to talk of friendship, which he thought, was essentially a youthful affair. There had to be passion in friendship – though not necessarily sexual [and, the phrasing suggests, neither to the exclusion of the sexual]: and only boys were capable of that passion and enthusiasm. He himself,’ Ackerley writes of the Dewan, ‘had had that passion in his youth, and the friend he had then was a staunch friend still’ (Ackerley; (1932) 1983: 207). During his stay, Ackerley also developed short friendships with the sixteen year old Sharma and the twenty year old Narayan, servants of the Maharajah. Of one evening with Narayan he writes in the same memoir, ‘he suddenly laughed softly and drew me after him. And in the dark roadway, overshadowed by trees, he put up his face and kissed me on the cheek. I returned his kiss; but he at once drew back, crying out: ‘Not the mouth! You eat meat! You eat meat!’ ‘Yes, and I will eat you in a minute,’ I said, and kissed him on the lips again, and this time he did not draw away’ (*ibid.* 218).

not shared evenly by all its participants. At other times, *masti* is less about emotional intimacy or a sharing of sentiments and more about rituals of necessary brashness, of a hard-edged buddiness. Note that Mystic\_Aswad's adages on male friendship, as quoted in the epigraph, are already very distinct from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> cinematic conventions of male friendship which were depicted as sentimental and emotionally ripe bonds as in *Dosti*. A customary avoidance of explicit utterances of mutual care in *masti* frames the language of sentiment or enthrallment as bordering on the pathetic, the excessive and the shameful. It is that going beyond the *point*.

Moreover *masti* re-cites a history of social insults around anal penetration and male effeminacy. *Gaandu* is the common Hindi invective for the one who gets fucked, *gaand* is a cruder word for the arse. *Chakka*, literally a sixer, is used to deride male effeminacy, in schools, on streets and on internet forums. The play within *masti* can diffuse the violent potential of such terms, using them only in playful and joking ways, but this usage is never lost and abruptly appears in contexts that are not mutual, that are out of one's control. Furthermore, *masti* always remains distinguishable from the idiom of *dil* (heart) or *pyar-mohabbat* (love) which comes close to romance, and is symbolically different from *just masti* by being enclosed within the pair, by its desired exclusivity and longevity, and its traffic not in the *elsewhere* but instead within and as the family unit, within and as marriage. Propped by all these variable distinctions, *masti* always means different things for different men. Penetration may often mark the border of the play within *masti*, that is, its crisis point of definition, where *masti* among friends ceases to be *masti*, where friends cease to be friends. Remember that rohit\_arzoo asks for *masti* but 'not too much hanky panky' (PR). Kamleshwar's Shivraj too is speculating about where to draw the line. It is such lines that disrupt the idea of continuum. 'The boys and (to a lesser extent) men,' Cohen



writes, 'who play around with friends their own age and of similar background must negotiate this mutual terrain of play' (*ibid.*). *Masti* is borne more out of this constant negotiation.

However, when amirraja from Brahmapur, Orissa invites 'all m2m/gay sex liking' people for 'fun and masti' and for having 'gay...sex with ur boy friend' (PR). He is at once using and conflating at least four repertoires. His wishes are worked out by a mixing of idioms, by a post-liberalization media universe which has picked up these idioms and got them to collide in print and on screen. '[B]oyfriend' is a straight lift from the almost common-sensical register of romantic love and relationships. '[G]ay' is a term of sexual identification straight out of magazines and films, out of pride-marches and protests, and even out of clinics, businesses and agony-aunt columns. Widely available in the English media, 'gay' is also increasingly syndicated in the Indian Hindi language media in both transliterated and translated versions. Additionally, amirraja's use of 'm2m' is a both a reigning internet abbreviation for quickly indicating the male seeker/sought equation, but is also a variation of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) which is a functional term for describing the catchment area within HIV-AIDS health interventions in India during the last two decades. All these ways of understanding, of experiencing situations of same-sex desire work with the idiom of *masti*. They inform the space that it clears for such experiences.

This space of *masti*, thus, is certainly a provocation to metaphors like the continuum but it is also a holding back from it. It is the channel for the accommodating experiences and bandwidth of male friendship but it is also always oddly placed in its relation to other forms of desire of men for men. It is at a tangent to the language of romance – *masti* always inhabits an interrupted time, and scarcely projects into shared future of a primary pair. Instead, it takes place in its interstices. It has an odd relation with gayness – *masti* itself is not an adopted

identity, or a specific sexual orientation. It is not overdetermined by the medical or political registers. Furthermore, *masti* is also at a tangent to the social setup of the family – it almost always happens outside the precincts of the familial and the socially necessary. Set in such interrelations – that jostle with each other, not slide – *masti* tells the fuller story of the figure of the friend on PR.

### **(viii) Conclusion**

I will finish with a series of four important ideas and observations that we can glean from this chapter. First, it is fruitless and miscalculated to read all patterns of desire between men as ‘gay’ even if they transpire on an international ‘gay’ dating website like PR. This desire is best read in terms of interrelated but separately recognizable figures such as the friend, the lover, the gay or the migrant. Secondly, it is evident that in the course of the last fifteen years, the internet has become a crucial meeting point for thousands of Indian men looking for each other. They use this technology productively and variably. The internet does not simply reflect the preexisting offline universe – it indexes it but creates its own demands and peculiarities. People both condense themselves into registration slots and figures but also exceed them with their profile texts and pictures that mix and match figures. The specific time/space of the internet makes possible a more *discretionary* interaction among its users. It recasts the offline world through these *discretions* by making a world out of personal desires and prejudices. It props up the user self only to disaggregate it into many situations, as always moving, always searching. Thirdly, patterns of urban migration, housing and differing abilities to participate in the consumption practices of the city have a crucial bearing on the way men meet each other and

how important or unimportant sexual identities become for their self-images. And lastly, the popularity of the modern idea of romance has crucial implications for the partitioning of the figures of the lover and the friend. This bears upon hugely on the way men relate to each other. Non-narrative forms such as the *ghazal* and non-familial forms of interaction such as *masti* constantly interrupt the romantic idea from any unequivocal domination and arrange a mixed assortment of the kinds of male intimacies possible in South Asia. Internet spaces like *PlanetRomeo*, being sites of experiment, both evidence and heighten these observations.



Fig. 3: Planetromeo Home Page

## The Art of Personal Narratives: Sexuality and Story-telling in Activism

‘The reason we sound loud is because we are breaking a deafening kind of silence. But there is nothing louder than silence...what will happen is that as people feel that the moment of shock has lessened, that the expectation of compulsory heterosexuality has lessened, that the consequences of an everyday course of sharing as you are comfortable when you are comfortable in the mainstream [have lessened], I think you will find that there are not a lot of gay people who want to run around talking about their sexuality everyday. *I mean we took these identities partly because we had to*’ – Gautam Bhan, anti-displacement and queer activist, on television show ‘We the People’ special edition ‘Being Gay: The Parents Story’, Delhi, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011, (emphasis mine)

‘ , देखिये , हैं बड़ों निपट कि क्या करते हैं  
 में, आस्तीन में लें, हि हैं, आदि  
 हैं स्वयंवर, में दिया पब्लिक , क्या  
 [applause] सुनिए सुनिए हैं कोटे में सुप्रीम कोटे में, नहीं , दादी नहीं हैं,  
 नहीं हैं, में हैं, दिया , हैं कि मजी  
 जिये, में , में इसकी दादी , में रूढ़ीवादी नहीं , अरे वो जापान में सारे बह गए पांच में,  
 वहाँ गे ट्रेंड लो और दुसरे ट्रेंड लो, उनको ट्रेंडने जाओ और मुझे बताओ कि गे थे और कि दुसरे थे,  
 , में क्या [It is like this, see madam, that those who

oppose must first tackle the grown-ups, see what they are upto, look into their own matters, those who make law are the ones who break it, even in the ancient times they had syamwar, if in those times the public had given this right, then what is the problem now [applause] and listen listen those judges who are sitting in the high court, in the supreme court, they are not mothers, they are not grandmothers, they do not have those feelings which we have, I am his grandmother, but I am not a reactionary, and *all those in Japan got swept off [by the tsunami] in five minutes, now go there and find the gay in them, and the others in them, go and find and tell me how many were gay and how many were others*, then give them [gesturing towards her grandson] the right to live, who knows what will happen the next moment ’]’ – Rani Sharma, accompanied by her grandson, on television show ‘We the People’ special edition ‘Being Gay: The Parents Story’, Delhi, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011, (emphasis mine)

Sexual identity is a double thing. Double in all senses. One in that it is not singular – it always comes through a historically changing set of meanings. An example: *Gay men* were popular figures of death and waste throughout the decade of AIDS in the 1980s United States (Bersani: 1987). By the turn of the century, however, with steady decriminalization and more middle-of-the-road depictions in literature and on screen, the same constituency was increasingly seen through the lenses of life and productivity, of being important, contributing citizens of the State (Puar: 2007). Sexual identity is a double thing because it can perform such semiological turn-coats *over time*. Historically, it always has the capacity to transform, for better or for worse.

It is also double in the sense that it always doubles up, always curving, always sharing its lodging with other factors of identity. Sexual identity *as it is lived out in real time* is always bending suddenly, making unpredictable appearances and exits in individual lives and situations. It does not consistently overdetermine the lives of those it attaches itself to. An example would be the guiding idea behind the politics and scholarship on ‘intersectionality’ and subjectivity in South Asia – the idea which establishes that different identities occupy uneven patterns of significance for any given individual at different times and places (Jaya Sharma, Dipika Nath: 2005).<sup>37</sup> We are an always shifting and always incongruent sum of all our possible identities of gender, caste, sexuality, age, colour *et. al.*. Sometimes our sexuality may come into prominence, say at the moment when we register a ‘homophobic’ crime, or when we fill up a dating website

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<sup>37</sup> For an interesting example of change from an overt identity-based politics to adopting politics based on intersectionality, and for a detailed exploration of each political strategy, see the example of Delhi-based activist group ‘Prism’ in Sharma, Jaya and Nath, Dipika, 2005, ‘Through the Prism of Intersectionality: Same Sex Sexualities in India’ in Misra, Geetanjali and Chandiramani, Radhika (ed.) *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 82-97.

form, at other times, it might be our age-group, say when we fill up electoral rolls (Brown: 1997). The idea of intersectionality never spells out a simple additive model of subjectivity, where you stack one identity over the other. Its basic and most exciting idea is not cumulative but instead situational – individual lives as a cluster of situations, each exceeding the other, never simply comparable or equatable.

This doubleness is at the heart of the real-time life of sexual identity. I tell two stories in this chapter. One is of the history of *sexuality* as a form, particularly its history in the European and colonial discipline of psychoanalysis which determines to the large extent in which sexuality is largely conceptualized. The other story is of the everyday life of sexuality, the way it actually travels, the way people use it. The first story is impossible and too bookish without the second – which is why the same chapter tells both – more significantly, the second story revises the terms of the first conceptually. The story of a concept is always ineffective if it is not constantly offset by the story of its movement. Sexuality, above all, is *a lived thing*. It is in the social life of sexuality that its form is simultaneously used and abused, tactically adopted and cast off, heightened and cheapened. In real time, sexuality is a dithering thing, making sense more as an event, a situation, as something relational rather than simply as a name, a permanent marker, a limit. *I mean we took these identities partly because we had to* (Bhan: 2011). The history of the idea of sexuality is most exciting, not least politically, when it is humbled by the history of its everydayness.

Around 2003 in Delhi, Gautam Bhan was twenty-three when he and a group of friends started thinking about the volume of essays that he was to co-edit with his friend Arvind Narrain and publish later in 2005 as *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. It was one of the ‘first big

sexuality books' that dotted the last decade of non-fiction publishing in India (prsnl interview: Gautam Bhan; May 2011). Its young publisher at the small Yoda Press, Arpita Das, a friend of Gautam's, wanted the book to be 'bold, clear and unapologetic' (*ibid.*). She was clear about the framing of the book as making a loud statement, as doing the work of assertion and of claiming. This was evident when it finally came out.

On its back cover, the book promised to be a 'groundbreaking collection', to give 'voice to a concept, an identity and a politics that is only now,' it said, 'and slowly at that, beginning to enter the consciousness of the nation'. However, behind this surface of clear, bold assertion was another elaborate story. That of the series of debates, hesitations and disagreements, a back and forth of articles between the editors and the contributors, their gradual transformation into published pieces, a crucial change in the working title of the book and the effort at getting the word on paper to match the political vision of the editors and the writers.

I want to argue that the moment when sexual identity asserts itself is already a double moment. What the back cover asserts, the pages complicate. To what the frame shouts out, the content adds noise. The story of assertion is to be read against this background of how the volume was put together. One of the first excitements about the book, Gautam told me, was that it could be a third academic, a third activist and a third personal. In the final form this meant a section of academic analytic essays, a section of stories of queer activists on ground and a section of personal narratives, of 'personal journeys of queer lives'. This already meant that no single analytic category was simply sustainable from one section to another. Instead, they were intermixed and qualified.

For the longest time the working title of the book had been the title of one of its personal narratives submitted by a young Psychology undergraduate from the University of Arizona – Vaibhav Saria's *I'm Out and Here's Why*. The publisher particularly liked this title. Gautam was sure, however, that this name was not to be. The final title already shifted gears politically. It did not focus on *being out* as the primary way of doing sexuality politics. Retaining that strand in the conceit of 'voicing', the name change nevertheless displaces it from being a chief strategy of the South Asian queer movements. Where the stories sent by the activists appeared to be too neat or too linear, the editors sent them back for revisions, for playing about with the ways the stories of activism around sexuality could be written. 'We asked them,' Gautam said, 'to put back the lingering grudges, to put back the complexities, the fights and the disagreements' (prsnl interview). At that time, Gautam felt, activists 'were not willing to air dirty laundry'. 'That has changed post-decriminalization,' he added, referring to the July 2009 Delhi High court judgment. There was a year worth of 'solid editing' that went into shearing away the neatness and getting to the doubleness of the everyday life of sexuality, of the situations it throws up. The book celebrated sexual identity but always in this provisional manner. It celebrated it as a bit of strategizing that does specific political and personal work for us. This provisionality is crucial to the daily life of sexuality, in banners or in books, in the lives of people it touches. Already in 2008, talking in the context of Delhi's first Queer Pride march, the same editor Gautam Bhan, five years older than when he first started thinking about the book, was to locate the apotheosis of sexual identity in its forgetting. 'Sexuality,' he said, 'is ironically, being able to forget. To forget that one's being gay or lesbian or transgendered is just one part of one's identity, rather than everything that one is' (Bhan: 2008) 'In India today,' he said, 'you cannot



forget. You cannot forget your caste if you are a Dalit, your gender if you are a woman, your religion if you are not Hindu or your sexuality if you are not heterosexual. The right to forget is a freedom' (*ibid.*). The sexual identity was seen as a temporary contract that we enter into, which we make sense only in this temporariness, in this tacticality. Forgetting not simply as an act of idealized passing, being unremarkable while one *is* 'lesbian' or 'gay', but instead, as something more exciting, going beyond being 'lesbian' or 'gay' by seeing this *being* itself as double, now mattering, now not mattering, now there, now absent. The idea of sexuality is played out in this game of remembrance and forgetting, a game that is played out *over historical and individual time*. This is how sexual identity doubles up. This is how it travels.

#### **(i) Sexuality: What the word has been upto**

In his little book on the short history of the term, Joseph Bristow notes that *sexuality*, which is a 'comparatively new term' has not always meant the same (2007: 2). Its meanings differ over time-periods and according to the specific institutional contexts in which it was articulated. The sense of the word *sexuality* '[i]n its earliest scientific usage...defined the meanings of human eroticism, and when marked by a prefix – such as bi, hetero or homo – the word came to describe types of person who embodied particular desires' (*ibid.*). This meaning was primarily indexical and classificatory which meant that people were marked according to kinds of *sexuality* they were thought to have. This meaning started becoming popular in late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America, a period which saw an explosion of scientific, anthropological and sociological knowledge around sex (Foucault: 1978; Bristow: 2007; Weeks 1986).

Although the primary conceit in *sexuality* is indexical and classificatory, this did not exhaust all the ways in which the word was used. The other possible senses of the word survived with its indexical function, such as that of ‘the quality of being sexual or having sex’ or ‘recognition of or preoccupation with what[ever] is sexual’ (Bristow: *ibid.* 3). For instance, *sexuality* when used in critical feminist scholarship and politics does not chiefly invoke its function to mark people as *heterosexual* or *homosexual*, but instead mainly to mark their capacity for sexual pleasure and freedom of choice in sexual matters (Jaya Sharma, Dipika Nath: 2005).<sup>38</sup>

However, the word-concept travels frequently through the possibility of that very modern question: *what is your sexuality?* In its possibility to become a criteria whereby people can be differentiated. Bristow recounts a watershed episode from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century BBC arts editor J.R. Ackerley’s memoir *My Father and Myself* (1968, 1991) to talk of the increasing frequency of this meaning of the word. Ackerley recalls his bafflement at being asked by a friend shortly after the First World War (1914-18) in which he had fought: ‘Are you a homo or a hetero?’ ‘I had’ writes Ackerley, ‘never heard either term before...’, [b]ut ‘there seemed only one answer’ to this question. Even if he ‘did not care for the word “homosexual” or any label’, Ackerley claims that the term now enabled him to discern exactly where he stood on ‘the sexual map’ (Bristow: *ibid.* 4). This *sexual map* was the popular product of the immense body of sexological and

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<sup>38</sup> For one of the many examples of this common feminist usage of the word-concept of *sexuality*, see the work and publications of CREA which is a feminist, human rights organisation based in New Delhi since the year 2000. It was formed ‘by a group of development professionals who have been working in the diverse fields of reproductive rights, sexuality, violence against women, media and women’s human rights’. Its training sessions, books and pamphlets all predominantly use this non-classificatory sense of the word. They use *sexuality* to further women’s freedom, consent and pleasure *in sexual matters*. The taxonomic sense does retain some situational purchase but never becomes principal.

psychoanalytical researches conducted and its immense literature produced in Europe, America and in the colonial metropolises. Ackerley's experience has behind it almost sixty years of these specific branches of knowledge 'inducing [sex] to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it' (Foucault; 1978: 34).

The words *homosexuality* and *heterosexuality* themselves first appeared in the English language in the 1892 translation of the Austrian sex researcher Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Bristow: *ibid.*). This *sexual map* continued to provide the fundamental terms of study and data-collection for researchers that were to mark the popular imagination for viewing and classifying human sexual behavior. Alfred C Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) placed male sexual experience on a 0-6 scale from *exclusive heterosexuality* (0) to *exclusive homosexuality* (6). When he died in 1956, the *New York Times* reported that he had already 'gained world-wide fame for his books' (NYT: August, 1956). His terms and concepts in the Kinsey reports on male and female sexual behavior had become, in the words of the then president of Indiana University, 'part of the scientific heritage of the entire world' (*ibid.*). Around the time he died Kinsey's 800 page volume on male sexuality had already sold about 500,000 copies and Kinsey himself had become part of the popular culture, appearing on the cover of the *Time* magazine in early 1950s. Talking of the immense popularity of Kinsey reports, the magazine reported that booksellers had not seen sales like this since Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936).

Where ever the Kinsey report went, there went his terms and his frames of thinking. 'As a onetime student of insects, Kinsey had set out to apply the "taxonomic approach" to human beings. This involves studying a "series of individuals" large enough to stand as "representatives

of the species.'" (*Time*: March, 1948). *Sexuality* became popular as something that could denote specific *species* of people based on their desires. His findings in both the reports were as much about how singular terms – *homosexual* or *heterosexual* – cannot exhaust, or even adequately describe, the template of sexual experiences over individual lives. The terms themselves, however, gained a popular function of classification independent of his findings and the peculiar confusions of his research team. *Sexuality*, being a simple, portable frame of understanding, travelled easily. The question that had baffled Ackerly – *are you a homo or a hetero* – was already less baffling. The *sexual map* was gaining ground.

Three years before the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City more or less visibly consolidated the long-brewing trend of *homosexuality* used as a minority position to stage a struggle for acceptance, there had appeared an unsigned article in the *Time* responding to this trend, to this confrontational potential of the word-concept. To the 'relatively new phenomenon' of the 'so-called homophile groups' where the minoritization implicit in the word became a political tool (*Time*: Jan 1966). Being then the sounding board for middle-class respectability in the United States, *Time* published 'The Homosexual in America' whose author worried that 'homosexuality' 'today...is not only mentioned; it is freely discussed and widely analyzed' (*ibid.*). Talking of 'homosexuality', he said that it 'deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as minority martyrdom, no sophistry about simple differences in taste' (*ibid.*). The *sexual map* – of homosexual and heterosexual, gay and straight – was already popular enough a reality for the author, worried as he was about 'Homosexual ethics and esthetics...staging a vengeful, derisive counterattack on what deviates call the "straight" world' (*ibid.*).

Doctors, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists populate his entire article with researches being cited, ideas being bandied and observations being made on sexuality. '[P]sychoanalysts,' he noted, are dexterously studying the cause of 'homosexuality' or 'are busy treating wives who have suddenly discovered a husband's homosexuality'. The author refers to the 'consensus' in 'current psychoanalytic theory' to talk about what makes people 'homosexual'. Talking about this cause of homosexuality, he gives a stunted lesson in Freud. 'The consensus,' he says, 'is that it is caused psychically, through a disabling fear of the opposite sex', of 'normal sexual development' having gone astray during childhood. However, to the question 'is homosexuality curable,' the author says 'Freud thought not'. He is troubled by this ambiguity of the medical and psychoanalytic profession about whether homosexuality *can be* or *should be* cured. 'Kinsey had a lot to do with this,' the author grudges, 'for to him all sexual pleasure was equally valid. "The only unnatural sex act," he said, "is that which you cannot perform."'.

'Homophile' groups such as the *Mattachine Society* setup in Los Angeles in the early 1950s and 'Daughters of Bilitis' setup in San Francisco in 1955 picked up enthusiastically on this open-endedness of much psychoanalytic and scientific material on 'homosexuality', not simply as a disease but as a psychic and bodily difference of taste, as a matter of just having a different *sexuality*. This element of difference had ready political usage. It lent itself to being framed politically. Difference of *sexuality* could be set as a premise for fighting unacceptance and injustice within society. The guiding idea of 'equality' could be used once *sexuality as a differential criterion* had been established in popular usage with a scientific credence, even if haphazard. Members of the Mattachine Society put picket lines outside the White House to speak against the exclusion of open 'homosexuals' from the armed forces and the civil services

and from the government's Poverty Program. Even '[b]orrowing a device from the civil rights movement,' the author of the *Time* article noted, 'homophiles have even issued lapel buttons bearing a small equality sign ( = ) on a lavender background' (*ibid.*). The sexual map was gaining ground politically.

In the late 1960s, when the Indian photographer Sunil Gupta was about 14 or 15, he used to hang out with his sister at the 'most notorious place in Delhi' – The Cellar, the first nightclub in the city that was started outside a hotel (Doctor: June, 2009). Supposed to be chaperoning his sister, he recalls, he was usually 'given a Coke and told to sit in a corner seat' (*ibid.*). Sunil recalls hearing conversations in the club that were his first introduction to the sexual map of *gay* and *straight*. 'They said, did you know that guy there is gay' (quoted in Doctor: *ibid.*). 'He had heard about gays from magazines brought by Berkeley students who were paying guests with his family in Delhi. "They had gay personals ads, and while the students weren't gay, I could talk with them about it."' (*ibid.*). The *sexual map* being a glib idiom travels fast and various – with Berkeley students, with magazines, with Hollywood gossip, with popular news about scientific research such as Kinsey's or legal events such as Wolfenden's report, and with the English-speaking postcolonial middle-classes perusing their copies of the *Time*, their newspapers' international sections and their library books on modern medicine and psychiatry. The IPA, mentioned earlier, was already trafficking in staple ideas of psychoanalysis and participating in its international debates, and Indian authors such as Ismat Chughtai and Ramnath Lal, among others, were already engaging with the sexological and psychoanalytic ideas of *homosexuality*. The idiom of the homosexual had long been part of the imaginative horizon of several in India.

Gayatri Reddy isolated two events that quickened the popularization and the partial entrenchment of this sexual map in India. One was the establishment in 1990 of the 'first magazine for *alternative sexualities*, *Bombay Dost*' (2006: 217). This, in addition to 'the public gay persona' of its chief editor, Ashok Row Kavi sealed the wider penetration of the idiom (*ibid.*). 'Following the public recognition of an 'AIDS crisis' in the 1990s,' she writes, '...in turn inspired the establishment of several sexual health/gay advocacy groups in India – at least twenty by 2002' (2006: 217). The second reason she offers is the watershed event in contemporary South Asian history. This was the liberalization of the economy in India beginning early 1990s, one that 'greatly increasing the transnational traffic in persons, signs and images' (*ibid.*). It introduced foreign based satellite television to middle and upper class India, something that by the end of the first decade of this century had exploded onto the screens of more than half of the country's households (Bajaj: 2007). Releasing its grip over broadcasting after almost fifty years, the Indian government opened the floodgates for a slew of domestic and global media companies like the News Corporation, Walt Disney and Sony Entertainment which now offered hundreds of channels to Indian television viewers. A deregulated television industry meant an unprecedented upheaval in things that could be seen and talked about. *Lesbian* jokes, *gay* characters, *gay* rights or documentaries and features talking of *homosexuality* became common, not only within English programming, but most excitingly for a genealogist of ideas, among local language programming including comedy, news and soap operas.

Writing in the early 1990s Ashok Row Kavi could use the term off this criss-crossing *sexual map* to define sexual behaviour and cultural groupings in India: 'There have always been opportunities for gay sex,' Reddy quotes him 'but the point is that it is now a movement, that it

is an evolving gay culture' (Reddy: *ibid.* 218). A series of urban social groups, NGOs, scattered media references and extended friend circles could be seen and viewed already as making up some kind of a 'gay culture'. 'Changes over the last decade have been dramatic,' Bhan wrote of the period between mid-90s and mid-noughties, 'a movement has emerged, rights have been advanced, attitudes (at least in urban India) are changing' (Bhan: 2008). Mid-late nineties saw the establishment of *lesbian* support groups and helplines like *Sangini* in Delhi, of *gay* social networking groups like Delhi's *Humrahi*, Bangalore's LGBT support group *Good as You*, Bombay's *Gay Bombay* and of sexual health AIDS NGOs spread around the country that also openly used the language of male 'homosexuality' in its researches and publications.

The February 1999 edition of privately distributed magazine of the *gay* group *Humrahi* in Delhi told its readers that the group 'meets every Saturday from 7:00 – 8:30 pm at D-45 Gulmohar Park, New Delhi (office of The Naz Foundation [an AIDS NGO])' (prsnl copy). 'The meetings,' it said, 'provide a congenial atmosphere to discuss problems relevant to us like marriage pressures, social and cultural stigma, and provide a support group for those who need it. It also helps in networking and meeting like minded people' (*ibid.*). What is most interesting is that there were always sizeable criss-crossing connections and doublings between the members of these gay support groups, of the AIDS-based NGOs, of lesbian help lines, of writers within media *getting the word out there*, and of those who frequented privately organized queer parties at farm-house and discotheques in metropolitan cities and adjoining areas. At once dispersed in countless cruising spaces and at once an isolable network of three-degree connections, what went under the name of 'gay culture' in the 1990s was actually the uncertain movement of an idiom, of the sexual map staking claim as common-sense.



It was in this larger context that legal amendment of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was being pushed through by an AIDS NGO in Delhi – The Naz Foundation. After ABVA, the *AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan* (AIDS Anti-discrimination Campaign) had unsuccessfully filed a petition challenging the constitutional validity of the anti-sodomy provision to facilitate work such distribution of condoms among jail inmates, Naz Foundation in the next decade challenged it under constitutional articles on equality, on equality on the basis of sex, on freedom of speech and expression, and on the right to privacy and health. This it did in order to remove legal obstructions for its community health interventions, especially AIDS awareness, among ‘vulnerable’ groups like MSM (Men who have sex with Men) and Hijras. In 2006, Voices Against 377, a Delhi-based coalition of human rights, women’s rights and children’s rights groups, filed an intervention in the Court in support of the Naz Foundation petition. These hearings led to the watershed reading-down of the section by the Delhi High Court bench in July 2009, the judgment that, at the time of writing this thesis, is being fought in the Indian Supreme court. Over these years, the activists and lawyers in a sense have worked out a legal, political use of the *sexual map*. Always believed to be invested with distinct, inalterable rights, the democratic-citizen subject would now just have to have an expanded template of rights, including *sexuality*. *Sexuality*, in this legal language, would be understood as just one of the several distinct attributes of the individual, framed as her or his right. Within a democratic language which *needs constituencies to represent*, the idea of the homosexual works to provide a readymade constituency. In talking of *minority* rights or the rights of the LGBT *community*, the activists further mobilize this group function of the sexological-psychoanalytic idea of the homosexual. Homosexuals as particular, as quantifiable minorities, which can be seen, represented.

What has happened in this last decade in India tells us something very interesting about how this idea is used in law. A select group of activists and lawyers have evoked an old anti-sodomy law that was largely outside the mainstream public memory and legal usage as the placeholder of all the discriminations and injustices faced by people who desire the same sex.<sup>39</sup> They have momentarily fetishized this law to discuss the terms of themselves as legal citizen subjects. In doing so, they have entered into a sort of contract with the legal language, with its way of seeing things. They have taken a conscious political step of framing all the people they speak for in a language that is best suited for legal redressal, of minority citizen subjects with *sexuality* as a right. *I mean we took these identities partly because we had to* (Bhan: 2011).

When approached by the members of the ABVA, the AIDS Anti-Discrimination Campaign in the late 80s, 'Dr. A.S. Paintal, until recently [then] Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) insist[ed] that homosexuality is alien to Indian culture. (Interview with ABVA, October 1989)' (*Less than Gay*; 1991: 32). What did Dr. Paintal mean here by 'homosexuality'? Was he gesturing towards the absence of self-identifying gay and lesbian people in the long annals of Indian history? Was he suggesting the absence of same-sex sex, implying that no Indian has ever desired another Indian of the same sex, that such a thing has never happened within the geographical boundaries of the nation State? Through the 1990s and into the next decade, there was an immense Hindu-right wing rhetoric in India that claimed vociferously that there is no 'homosexuality' in India. Maharashtra's regional political party Shiv Sena's supremo Bal Thackeray, in his response to Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996), a film about the emotional and sexual relationship of two women in a lower middle class Hindu household, went ahead

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<sup>39</sup> For more, see khanna: 2010.

and further curtailed this zone of no-homosexuality from the nation-State to the Hindu households of the nation-State. 'Why does the story revolve around a Hindu family,' he asked, 'why has the filmmaker named the main characters Sita and Radha' (Thackeray quoted in sawnet.org; Dec 1996). Stating that his party would stop the attack on the cinema halls showing the film only if the director gave Muslim names to the two women, he remarked: '[c]ould not the filmmaker have named them Shabana, Saira or Najma...Fire may have received 14 international awards but will anyone deliberate on the harm these people are doing by *ushering in a wretched culture*' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

Within this exclusionary Hindu-centric rhetoric, the quantifiability of same-sex desiring people as the 'homosexuals' was crucial. This way it could figured easily as something localizable in space, something that could be ushered *in* or kept *out*. Homosexuality as a compact point of reference. This facilitated its mobilization as something that could be *imported from the West* and as something we have to guard ourselves against. The large-scale activist response, not unsurprisingly, was then to prove the local existence of *homosexuality*, that the homosexuals have always been around, that they are indigenous. 'If this report,' ABVA members wrote for *Less Than Gay*, 'can expose the silly lie that homosexuality does not exist in India, or that gay people are a species from a different planet, we will feel our efforts rewarded' (*Less Than Gay*; 1991: 4). 'Finding our voice is the beginning of our politics,' Bhan and Narrain wrote, 'for it is in *the naming of ourselves* that we begin to question the cultural, social and political basis of those that seek to invisibilize us' (emphasis mine, Bhan and Narrain; 2005: 2). A momentous reply was orchestrated in a series of such crisis points – *there is homosexuality in India*. There was an underlining sharing of concept – homosexuality – even in this theatre of conflict

between the activists and Hindu right-wing groups. They both zone in on the same set of references and terms with journalists and in the law-courts. The fall out only happens as to the question of the correct location.

Among the group of liberal sexuality activists and lawyers, law is temporarily overstated to be amended. Sexual identity is over-repeated, ideally – ironically – to make it irrelevant to people's lives and pursuits, to be forgotten. The idiom makes place in public memory in this strategic overstating. The activists, however, use an idiom, a sexual map, but know that it was not the end. That it is not the sum of all imagination around same-sex desire, not the peg for all self-images. Sitting in the same media studio as the activists involved in the Supreme Court case on section 377, including Gautam Bhan, Rani Sharma, grandmother of a young gay activist in Delhi, takes the sexual map with a pinch of salt, ascribes to it a casual provisionality: '[A]ll those in Japan got swept off in five minutes, now go there and find the gay in them, and the others in them, go and find and tell me how many were gay and how many were others' (Sharma: 2011). In different hands and at different moments, sexuality's will to recognize, to typify people turns irrelevant. Its minoritizing function gets confuted. Rani Sharma, born and raised in a Punjab village married and came to Delhi in the late 60s. She is the grandmother of Sambhav Sharma, a young gay activist, and a recent member of the queer collective *Nigah* of which Bhan is an older founding member. Different ideas about sexuality, its conflicting senses, always exist very near each other, in such proximate relationships. Playing with each other, offsetting and substituting each other. Sexuality affects differently *over time, through situations*. The activist gesture does not and can not ever sell *sexuality* as the end of the story. In fact, *sexuality* is only one form of

story-telling about lives, meshing with other forms, with other ways of doing and speaking same-sex desire. Always, *sexuality* is a tactically used narrative ploy.

**(ii) What has Homosexuality got to do with telling stories: After Freud, and, The Everydayness of Sexuality in Political Activism**

One of my teachers in Delhi, Udaya Kumar, used to explain the concept of the Freudian unconscious with an image. He used to draw a horizontal white line on the blackboard which was meant to be the ground. Then making a slight gash in the line, he talked of a burial. A burial of things, memories, doubts, objects, kingdoms etc. which were all marked by a chalk smudge a little below the line, to be understood as the proverbial six feet under. Then, a little unpredictably at first, he rubbed the gash and made the horizontal line continuous as before. In a fairly simple move the unconscious was explained as that which was buried and whose burial was subsequently forgotten – the chaste continuity of the dividing line reappearing. The unconscious is, as it were, at a remove from us by a burial and a consequent forgetting of that burial. It was, moreover, placed within a vertically arranged spatial schema with an apparent *above* and a hidden *under*.

This burial/forgetting-of-burial schema is necessary for the imaginative constitution of the unconscious. The unconscious is in some sense imagined into being through this story of its making. The story is akin to a genesis myth that talks of beginnings which serve to explain what follows. The unconscious is also interiorized by this story. Always inside, below, under, it is allocated a specific place within what is undeniably a spatial schema.

Spatially inflected language of *repression* of desires or of wishes being driven *underground* or *behind* is frequent in Freud. There is the architectural metaphor of the building – 'A prominent piece of the dream is to be seen in the phantasy of revenge against her father, which stands out like a *facade* in front of the rest.' (Freud: 1905 [1901] tr. 1953: 152, emphasis mine). Or that of spatial obstruction of view, '*screened* by these thoughts of revenge...' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine) Example of pearls in oyster shells is not unknown. The unconscious thereby assumes the role of the vast reservoir which contains the materials it is thought to contain: hidden intentions, repressed memories, unspoken desires and doubts. Access to this reservoir is now only accidental or occasional. Dreams are explained as an experience of an interface with this something inside us, as an intermittent access to this reservoir. The slips of the tongue give us a clue of the secrets stored inside this space, a space which is basically metaphorical. 'Like every metaphor, this metaphor suggests something, makes some thing visible' (Althusser: 1971).<sup>40</sup>

What could have been difficult to explain as acts of manifest intention now find an explanation from the inside, as it were. Invisible to us and yet internal to us, always controlling our actions

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<sup>40</sup> As an example of how basic spatial metaphors often massively influence our critical understandings of the people and processes in the world around us, note Althusser's reading of Marx's topographical, 'spatial' metaphor of the economic *base* and the superstructure that has had a long, influential and contested history. 'Marx conceived the structure of every society,' Althusser writes, 'as constituted by 'levels' or 'instances' articulated by a specific determination: the infrastructure, or economic base (the 'unity' of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the superstructure, which itself contains two 'levels' or 'instances': the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc.)...It is easy to see that this representation of the structure of every society as an edifice containing a base (infrastructure) on which are erected the two 'floors' of the superstructure, is a metaphor, to be quite precise, a spatial metaphor: the metaphor of a topography (topique)...Like every metaphor, this metaphor suggests something, makes some thing visible. What? Precisely this: that the upper floors could not 'stay up' (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base' (Althusser: 1971).

and giving a clue of what we might be really thinking, the concept of the unconscious has a seductive explanatory power. The space that it is thought to occupy – the internal recesses of our mind, itself discursively established – is no less the grounds of this indubitable position that the unconscious enjoys. Freudian psychoanalysis ‘bases its own dictatorial power upon the dictatorial conception of the unconscious’ (Deleuze and Guattari: 1987: 18). The unconscious, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue, is ingeniously located within an ‘arborescent system’ that is a vertically arranged ‘hierarchical system...with *centres* of significance and subjectification’ (*ibid.* 16, emphasis mine). Primarily to disrupt Freud’s spatial schema for imagining its human subject, the two French philosophers devise the image of the ‘rhizome’, which is a root with tentacles moving unpredictably in different directions. With the ‘rhizome’ they counter the arborescent image of standing trees in Freud, where roots move towards a singularly imagined *below*. ‘We’re tired of trees...[w]e should stop believing in trees, roots and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much’ (*ibid.*). This interiorized unconscious placed in an arborescent structure, Deleuze and Guattari explain, becomes the basis of the formation of the human subject in Freud.

The discipline of Discursive Psychology, in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s observations in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), argues that ‘phenomena, which traditional psychological theories have treated as ‘inner processes’, are, in fact, constituted through social, discursive activity’ (Billig quoted in Kulick; 2000: 274). Accordingly, these discursive psychologists argue that ‘psychology should be based on the study of this acentered outward activity rather than upon hypothetical, and essentially unobservable, inner states’ (*ibid.*). They refuse to take this all explaining story of the ‘inner’ for granted.

Freud, however, built an entire system of thought on these *unobservable, inner states*. He made sense of human sexual behaviour and desires by setting them in the story of these *inner states*. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) he elaborates on the *diphasic* model of the development of the normal hetero-sexual subject who has to pass through the stages of the Oedipus complex and the castration complex to attain this normal sexual maturity (Bristow: 2007: 62-83). Freud built an elaborate developmental oedipal plot of sexual identifications and withdrawals which the growing subject has to undergo vis-à-vis her/her mother and father. This growing human subject is caught in, and her/his sexuality is determined by, this limited Oedipal triad of 'daddy, mommy and me' (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 101). Freud was, however, using traditional sexological categories like *heterosexual* and *homosexual*, used by sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) in the preceding century, and providing naturalized developmental plots – Oedipus complex and Castration complex – for attaining only one of these: *heterosexuality*. The heterosexual subject was the canny outcome of this Freudian plot of 'normal' maturity of the human ego with its imagined oedipal drives. Once the story was spun, all its variations could only appear as aberrations. The homosexual subject more or less appeared as a 'sexual aberration' within this naturalizing schema – the story that Freud picked up from Sophocles. The homosexual was the result of the oedipal plot misfiring.

Freud argued for a 'psychic bisexuality', germs of which, he mused, could be primordially present *inside* each one of us and have to be progressively filtered to attain normal sexual life. The condition of being homosexual was thus referred back to an inner state of *drives, germs, innateness, beginnings* which, we have seen, informs the language and the space of the unconscious. Based on this, Freud could contend that '[t]he sexual life of each one of us extends



to a slight degree – now in this direction, now in that – beyond the narrow lines imposed as the standard of normality' (1905[1901] tr. 1953: 84). This contention, however, was worked out on the basis of attributing aberrant 'perversions' to 'a development of germs all of which are *contained in* the undifferentiated sexual disposition of the child, and *which by being suppressed or by being diverted*' could become sources of creative energies for a 'great number of our cultural achievements' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). 'When, therefore, anyone has *become* a gross and manifest pervert, it would be more correct to say that he has *remained* one, for he exhibits a certain stage of *inhibited development*.' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

*What sexology only described, psychoanalysis interiorized.* The homosexual subject is here irrevocably made the matter of a deep inner. Her story is explained by this story of the inside. Psychoanalytic language used figures of *contained in, germs, suppression, inhibited development et. al.* Whereas the heterosexual subject emerging from here follows the *correct* route of development and attains normalcy, the homosexual subject, is unable to do so and remains what he primitively was.<sup>41</sup> In the homosexual, Freud wrote, 'the...germs of heterosexual tendencies' are 'blighted' (Freud: 1935). In his letter to an American mother in 1935, he wrote that *homosexuality* 'is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it

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<sup>41</sup> This developmental model which hierarchizes 'heterosexuality' over 'homosexuality' would be strangely persistent. Vinay Chandran and Arvind Narrain quote a sexologist from present day Bangalore: 'In another case, a patient told me that he was standing in a bus and another man with his erect penis poked him. I told him that he should not feel guilty that he had enjoyed. I instead told him that he was going to have better and better enjoyment once he got more and more involved with girls. If you are riding a cycle you are happy just riding it. But once you know that a scooter is better than cycle you would prefer to ride it' (quoted in Chandran and Narrain; 2005: 60). The Freudian homosexual is a secondary and more primitive creature than the fully developed and more advanced heterosexual subject, much like the story that relates the cycle to the scooter.

cannot be classified as an illness'. Despite these admissions, he stuck to his base conceit of *heterosexuality as the main story* and *homosexuality as a digression*, as a 'variation' (*ibid.*).

This Freudian story of the *homosexual* was effectively an epic mythology worked out in scientific prose. It was a story of hoary origins told as a rational endeavour. A mythology usually involves supernatural forces, for instance, the playfulness of Greek deities, the miraculous abilities of Indic epic heroes, or the uncanny traces of tribal ancestors. Even those agents performing the burial of the unconscious in Udaya Kumar's drawing, which themselves remained invisible on the black-board, make sense only within a mythical frame. A myth is a story usually located at the beginnings of things, and it becomes an aetiological framework for these *things* which follow, for instance, the Biblical Genesis as causing human life. The myth is an explanatory tactic. It becomes the launch pad that is itself outside history, as it were, in epic time, but accounts for the consequent unfolding of historical events, of the drama of personal lives. The myth proceeds by constructing a primal 'outside realm', a realm which defies any rigorous tracing of an idea, any effort at a connected genealogy (Derrida; 1972: 40). It works with this moment of an *apriori*. It justifies whatever follows by modeling it through this apriori. The Biblical story of Adam and Eve, for instance, among other things, is a myth of gender, of *man* and *woman*, of what each is made of and how each behaves. It postures as a primal model of relationships. Freud's story arranged his apriori, the mysterious unconscious, in a thus mystified period of human adolescence, full of conflicts, iconic events and stress. In fact Freudian psychoanalysis produced the period of adolescence as particularly revealing, as brimming with consequences for the rest of one's life.

It is in the same vein that homosexual sexual orientation is a myth. A myth that accounts for the immediate directionality of desire towards one or the other person, towards one or the other gender. All its realizations, we note, are located at the beginnings, usually childhood or other *earlier* experiences, which are later foregrounded, recounted within the situational trigger points that are personal narratives or psychoanalytic, counseling sessions. This makes *sexual orientation* into something specific, something traceable, a diachronic strand within an individual. Diverse moments of desire are linked to it only as its 'manifestations' – the etymon of the verb is Latin *manifestare* which is to reveal or to disclose – the sense is as if a particular sexual-orientation was always, already present there, only waiting for such revelations or disclosures. Within this scheme, the moment of *coming out* is inevitably seen as the first expression and a personal or public avowal of this diachronically imagined sexual orientation. *Sexuality as sexual orientation* is the product of an exercise in myth, another name for aetiology. It is a finding and ascribing of causes par excellence. '[T]he question of aetiology has functioned in discussions of homosexuality. That is, homosexuality, sadomasochism, prostitution, or boy-love are taken to be mysterious and problematic in some way that more respectable sexualities are not' (Rubin; 1992). Freud's work asserted that 'a psychosexual aetiology holds good generally and without exception for hysteria' (Freud; 1905[1901] Eng tr. 1953: 42). *When did you know that you were gay?* – will produce an answer that will be aetiological in its drive and will make causative linkages between present moments of desire and an imagination of a primordially present inner state, the one or the other sexual-orientation.

This Freudian theory, this mythical universe of adolescent misconceptions, was on offer and seductively labeled as 'consensus' in the 1966 article in *Time* on 'The Homosexual in America'.

‘The origins of this fear [of the opposite sex, and thus the attraction to the same],’ it said in the Freudian vein, ‘lie in the homosexual's parents’. ‘[T]o attain normal sexual development,’ it continued, ‘according to current psychoanalytic theory, a boy should be able to identify with his father's masculine role...’ (emphasis mine). This was the easy plot of the Freudian inflection of the oedipal mythology. Despite Freud’s doubts about the exact status of *homosexuality*, his key frames of ‘arrested development’ and his habit of using terms such as ‘normal’ and ‘variation’ lent this easy plot to be distilled and widely syndicated within popular imagination.<sup>42</sup>

In talking of the popularization of *the Freudian* in 1940s/50s America, Richard Dyer contended that ‘[t]he importance of the Oedipal phase accorded well with a society in which the notion of ‘adolescence’ as a distinctive life phase was already being emphasized’ (2003: 113). Above all,

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<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud’s April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1935 letter in reply to an American mother reads: ‘Dear Mrs [Erased], / I gather from your letter that your son is a homosexual. I am most impressed by the fact that you do not mention this term yourself in your information about him. May I question you why you avoid it? Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness; *we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function, produced by a certain arrest of sexual development*. Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men among them. (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, etc). It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime – and a cruelty, too. If you do not believe me, read the books of Havelock Ellis. / By asking me if I can help, you mean, I suppose, if I can abolish homosexuality and make *normal heterosexuality* take its place. The answer is, in a general way we cannot promise to achieve it. In a certain number of cases we succeed in developing *the blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies*, which are present in every homosexual in the majority of cases it is no more possible. It is a question of the quality and the age of the individual. The result of treatment cannot be predicted. / What analysis can do for your son runs on a different line. If he is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts, inhibited in his social life, analysis may bring him harmony, peace of mind, full efficiency, whether he remains a homosexual or gets changed. If you make up your mind he should have analysis with me — I don't expect you will — he has to come over to Vienna. I have no intention of leaving here. However, don't neglect to give me your answer. / Sincerely yours with best wishes, / Freud / P.s. I did not find it difficult to read your handwriting. Hope you will not find my writing and my English a harder task’ (emphases mine).

Freud's narratives were doing something peculiar for popular thinking about same-sex desire. With plenty of misfiring oedipal plots, the Freudian canon was giving 'the central dramatic motif of the young man passing through a tormented rite of passage', something that was widely reproduced in cotemporary book-covers, novel plots and underground films, that had same-sex desiring characters (*ibid.*).

*Homosexual* desire in Freud had come to occupy the deepest rung in his spatial imagined subject. It is the innermost secret behind a series of screens and facades. The choice of these dramatic spatial metaphors – screens and facades – was Freud's. Finishing his analysis of Dora's second dream, Freud's footnote remarks on her love for Frau K. *after* having spoken about her phantasy of revenge against her father, of her revenge against Herr K. and thirdly, for her love for him. '*Finally*,' he writes, 'we can see the action of the fourth and the *most deeply buried* group of thoughts – those relating to her love for Frau. K...' (1905[1901] tr. 1953: 152). 'I failed,' he writes, 'to discover in time and to inform the patient that her homosexual (gynaecophilic) love for Frau K. was *the strongest unconscious current in her mental life*...I had learnt of the importance of the homosexual current of feeling in psychoneurotics...' (*ibid.* 162). These are the Freudian tales that make possible an interiorized and distinct homosexual subject. In fact the homosexual subject was seen as closer to his own inner, primeval state. Homosexuality, and thereby heterosexuality, became irrevocably a matter of definition of the individual self thus told. In Freud's story it became something that was about the self's inner, deeper realities.

This base narrative in Freud would travel through popular culture, being parroted in various forms and guises. Already by the mid-sixties, Richard Dyer argues, 'employing psycho-babble...was the standard, middle-class mode for comprehending the tensions of domestic life'

(Dyer: *ibid.* 155). For instance, the American artist and film-director Andy Warhol's short film *Kitchen* (1965) has male and female characters miming Freudian aphorisms to tackle their emotional conflict and domestic stress: 'I've failed you. Both as a lover and mother I've failed you' or 'Isn't a mother a boy's best friend' (*ibid.* 156). With the popularization of the Freudian terms of imagination of the self, the deep 'unconscious' had become a glib denominator of human motivations and desires, specifically when they had to do the same-sex.

Early 'lesbian and gay' underground films in Europe and America would 'often be constructed along lines similar to the way that Freudian analysis construes dreams: unconscious thought processes seen as reworking elements from conscious perception' (*ibid.* 113). 'Objects and incidents,' would become 'highly charged emotionally and, especially, sexually'; 'things' would be 'substituted for other things,' 'places' would suddenly become 'other places', unexpected images would be juxtaposed (*ibid.*). Early underground 'gay and lesbian' films were preoccupied with subjectivity as subject matter, with the classic Freudian structure of taking a series of journeys into the self (*ibid.* 114-5). The vast pool of the Freudian was supplying foundation metaphors, spatial imaginations and cinematic tropes for thinking about the self and specifically about the self as experiencing desire for the same sex.

This Freudian *homosexual* would in turn be politicized in sexuality-rights movements. Activists would use this distinct psychologised status of the *homosexual* as grounds for an independent minority identity. Michael Warner notes the implication of gay and lesbian movements in a distinctly psychoanalytic vocabulary: '...the most rigorous and sophisticated language about sexuality is that of psychoanalysis, queer critics from the heady days of gay liberation onward have developed varieties of psychoanalytic radicalism' (Warner; 1993: xi-xii). In their newsletter

*The Ladder* established in San Francisco in 1956, 'Daughters of Bilitis' called themselves 'A Woman's Organization for the purpose of Promoting the Integration of the Homosexual into Society' (Katz; 1976: 426). Their mission statement, published on every inside cover of *The Ladder* until 1970 called on for '[e]ducation of the *variant*...to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society...this to be accomplished by establishing...a library...on the sex deviant theme; by sponsoring public discussions...to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other professions' (*ibid.*). This same statement saw the group's '[p]articipation in research projects by duly authorized and responsible psychologists, sociologists, and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of *the homosexual*' as being essential to their vision and practice (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

Early 'gay' and 'lesbian' activists, Warner writes, 'traced the demands of lesbian and gay liberation to fundamental psychic structures: the preoedipal, innate bisexuality, the exchange of women, reverse oedipalization, the instability of identification' (*ibid.*). Within this psychoanalytically inflected idiom, sexuality becomes irrefutably a matter of the self – a way of accessing and defining this self. More specifically, *homosexuality* posed as the substance of this Freudian tiered self par excellence because, as we learned in the case of Dora, it was imagined as its deepest content. There was nothing truer than the homosexual. The basis of this idea was the architecture of the secret – the real game of psychoanalysis. What you hide always seems to be truer than what you show – nothing else would have driven Freud more than this maxim. When desire for someone of the same sex has to be concealed from the public eye and expressed only in peculiar ways, then it occupies a specialized place in story-telling of these lives. When set in narrative situations like Freud's clinic, it becomes something like a hidden

grail. 'I gather from your letter,' Freud wrote to the American mother, 'that your son is a homosexual. I am most impressed by the fact that you do not mention this term yourself in your information about him. May I question you why you avoid it' (Freud: 1935). In Freud, it hardens into a term explaining sexual behavior, as something that is the internal cause of *such* desires. It gains the trust and precision of a technical term.

Already by the early 80s, within several circuits of European and American feminist politics and scholarship, the term *sexuality* had come to persuasively and almost irrevocably occupy an analytical position independent of gender. One of the grounds that the American feminist writer Gayle Rubin broke in her essay *Thinking Sex* was this sieving out of sexuality: 'I am now arguing that it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence' (Rubin: 1984, 1992). It opened the floodgates of this conceptual separation, of this understanding of the alleged independence of *sexuality's social existence*. This got worked out on-ground in many possible directions. It lent credibility to the many impulses within the concept, to many of its meanings, including its classificatory, minoritizing drive – sexuality as something self-sustaining, as an individual factor separable from other factors. Analysis does not simply ingest data. It fashions it, makes it digestible. Within this climate, activists could experience this term as an unshakeable premise, as a rallying point in articulating a struggle, as something beginning to be vindicated by scientific discourse and as a valuable, popular vocabulary to work with.

'Sexuality,' activists could now easily contend, was 'about identity...about *self*-respect' (Bhan: 2008; emphasis mine). Talking about the usage of the concept of sexual orientation within the emergent sexuality-rights movements at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in India, and



simultaneously historicizing the conceptual inheritances of these movements, the young writer and activist akshay khanna effectively notes the after-life of Freud in sexuality activism. '[S]exual orientation', he argues, postures as a *condition* of the person which makes him desire people of a particular sex, a condition '...that is somehow within the person, that is repressed by society and that needs to be expressed' (Khanna; 2005:93). This idea of 'sexuality,' he says 'has come to be naturalised, that is, the relationship between the idea and 'reality' has been placed beyond question'. Activism is one of the main turfs where this *idea* has staked a claim on the self's reality but this claim dithers more in activist praxis. Although Freud's baggage of an interiorised homosexual subject, as we will note, moves around a lot, it also transforms and hesitates as it does.

There are several examples of this criss crossing movement. Australian writer and activist Dennis Altman (b. 1943) notes that during the planning meetings of Asia/Pacific Rainbow, a 'group of self-consciously gay, lesbian, and bisexual activists from across South and East Asia and Australasia' that was participating in the 2002 Gay Games in Sydney, arguments of regional specificities of sexual arrangements were avoided 'in favour of a pragmatic stress on organizing around *homosexual* advocacy using the language of international human rights' (Altman: 2007: 149, emphasis mine). It should not be surprising that much of this activist literature on sexual matters, especially of transnationally funded NGOs that use the portable 'formal' political language of rights, deals more with *sexuality* and *sexual-orientation* as pivotal frontline concepts, appearing in banners, slogans and pamphlets, rather than with *intimacy, desire, fear, temporality, touch, love, friendship* or *sex*.

This is the effect, undeniably, of a wide-scale interiorization of the concept of sexual-orientation and of a social acclimatization of it as a distinct content of the self. Of its long-drawn politicization as one among the catalogue of rights furthered by international sexuality rights bodies like International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA, estb. 1978, England) and International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC, estbd. 1990, U.S.A.), organizations that hold consultative status with the United Nations and represent and speak with groups around the world. It seems *sexuality* is first buried in securely within the self. Conceptually, once it is buried, it lends itself more easily to be viewed as an innate right of this self, it facilitates a form of rights politics. '[A]ssertion of particular political subjectivities which legitimize their specific claims on some of their specific properties...[w]hen you justify your demands in some of your specific properties' (Zizek: 1999). Sexuality as a specific property of the self. Something everyone has, one or the other kind, something everyone has the right to express. Seemingly forgetting that this long-drawn burial ever took place. '...our self-essentialisation seems to be basic to our 'legitimate' political activism' (Khanna; 2005: 99).

However, I have argued that the idea of *sexuality* dithers more in activist praxis. In the political everyday, Freud's story does not simply take over. Here the many usages of *sexuality* do not neatly or consistently separate people into distinct groups or consider them innately different. The developmental peculiarity of the Freudian homosexual does not fully stand the test of everyday politics, is not simply duplicated in the dailiness of demanding rights. Instead, it is habitually contested, tactically used and situationally improvised. Early debates among Delhi's feminist sexuality activists verify this claim. Recounting his early involvement within sexuality activism in Delhi, in the years 2002-3, Gautam Bhan acknowledges the influence of the raw on-

ground debates around the idea of 'intersectionality' on how he and several of his peers viewed the term 'sexuality' then and what work they made it do. He had just come back after his bachelors in the States and found that the 'first public language around sexuality was forming, among us, among a few journalists' (prsnl interview). He recalls what he terms as a 'watershed' meeting at the office of the women's resource centre Jagori in those 'early days' of sexuality activism in the city. This was the women's day planning meeting where some activists concerned about a spate of 'lesbian suicides' in India had got together to discuss ways of tackling the matter.

Most of these activists were also friends of each other. Gautam particularly recalls this meeting for his discussions with Delhi based feminist and sexuality rights activists Jaya Sharma, Lesly Esteves and akshay khanna. 'This was when we had tried to involve other women's groups in this issue of lesbian suicides and got to hear: you guys do it and we will support from the outside'. Telling me of that moment, Gautam points out that there was a 'real anger' during that meeting. This anger was directed not only for what was happening out there, but also for the way the mainstream women's groups were treating the issue of these suicides. They did not understand it as a major issue to be taken up by 'all feminists'. Instead, it was framed as a 'LGBT' issue to be lent at times encouraging and mostly hesitant support from the outside. 'We were frustrated with the LGBTness of it all then, in our own vocabularies' and with what political situations it created.

It was in response to this moment that debates around the idea of intersectionality drew momentum within Delhi activists. It was in response to such events that idea of *sexuality* doubled up and was made to work in ways beyond simple 'minority politics' of international

NGOs. Writing about the 'same-sex sexualities in India' 'through the prism of intersectionality', Jaya Sharma and Dipika Nath looked at 'sexuality' as one of the many changing 'axes of construction and control' like gender, caste and religion (2005). Sharma and Nath were writing about the early days of a non-funded, non-registered, feminist forum of individuals based in Delhi called PRISM that started in August, 2001. The realization of sexuality's constructedness was part of the dailiness of this group's political work, it was much discussed. It was common-sensical in their literature and public interventions.

PRISM had a 'fluid', 'unstructured' makeup whereby those interested in 'the issues of gender and sexuality' came together as friends and colleagues, as temporary visitors from other cities and countries, as those who saw themselves invested in social change around these issues (2005: 96). Their perspective on sexual identity was always already double. On the one hand they recognized the 'meaning that [sexual] identities' could provisionally hold for 'individuals' and acknowledged that 'for the sake of political action, especially in the face of violations of rights, identities are useful to mobilize people as communities and create a sense of solidarity and power' (88-9). At the very same time, in the same breath, they constantly talked about and resisted the 'tendency' of identity-based politics 'to create restrictive and homogenous concepts of community', realized that sexuality ran the danger of being 'limiting', of becoming 'exclusive' and 'of creating hierarchies of oppression' (88).

Sexuality was not simply adopted by political groups but always contested by their varying beliefs and dreams. Political activism around sexuality is not a name that can be given to any one group, institution or movement. It provisionally denotes an array of support-groups, internationally funded development NGOs, AIDS health and advocacy groups, cultural

collectives, unregistered social groups, Queer Pride marches among others, all of which do not speak the same language or use the same terms to the same effect. 'When we first articulated our [intersectional] mandate,' Sharma wrote of PRISM, 'we committed to work with and across a multiplicity of subjectivities, unlike most LGBT groups, which target specific sexual identities' (86). They were trying to counter the tendency among middle and upper middle-class social support groups like Delhi's Humrahi or Bombay's Gay-Bombay that 'tend[ed] to be specific to particular identities' and usually did not question this premise in their bid to create safe spaces where gay men could meet and socialize. Also, PRISM consciously tried to cross-pollinate the work of organizations working on HIV/AIDS and male sexual health like Naz Foundation that were often insular to feminist questions and concerns with the language and concerns of progressive, feminist groups. PRISM tried to take stock of this complex and confusing array of groups and spaces in early 2000s Delhi and tried to respond to them with its peculiar take on the idea of sexuality – by initiating conversations over differences of vocabularies, funding-patterns and methods. They were trying to expand the meanings of the term sexuality, the contexts that invoked it, the things which it referred to, and the strategies that it implied.

PRISM used the term 'LGBT', Sharma and Nath remember, never as a set of neat, air-proof brackets but instead as shorthand for 'a diverse range of subjectivities', dissimilar for different people, and dissimilar for the same person over time through changing experiences and spaces. Its members tried to considerably *work in* their ideas with other types of organizations and spaces, especially during crisis points like the police arrest of workers from AIDS-based NGOs

like Bharosa Trust and Naz Foundation International in Lucknow.<sup>43</sup> In this constant cross-pollination, political activism uses but also demystifies the classificatory function within the idea of sexuality. Within political praxis, *sexuality* always does many works, has multiple entry points. *Sexuality* is always pegged on more than a single history of ideas. The concept exceeds its sexological-psychoanalytic history to make room for numerous political visions and practices.

‘Jaya was the one who introduced me to the word and concept of intersectionality,’ Gautam recalls, ‘they had written an essay on the subject that was on lgbt list-serves for ages, that was affecting all our vocabulary and discussions’. ‘I had helped Jaya and [co-author] Deepika edit that piece’ that later came to be published online and in book form. ‘Using it, I remember we made the case for ‘intersectionality’ in a big way at the World Social Forum in Mumbai 2004’ and in conversations with AIDS NGOs like Lucknow’s Bharosa Trust and Naz Foundation International and with women’s groups in Delhi. This was to really work out the ‘overlap’ among feminist, health and LGBT issues in a substantial, practical way. Not just add and stir. ‘For the longest time, in those early years,’ Gautam told me, “‘intersectionality’ for us was a

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<sup>43</sup> In the section ‘An Alliance Formed in Lucknow’, Sharma and Nath highlight the possibility of an organic and wonderful alliance between AIDS NGOs focussed officially on epidemiology and health outreach among MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) and progressive women’s groups who try to open up questions of gender and sexual division of labour within society. They wrote that ‘[t]he relationship between Bharosa Trust, Naz Foundation International and Lucknow women’s organizations began when the workers of these two NGOs were arrested in 2001. The women’s organizations rushed to the rescue of the workers, though they had little exposure to LGBT issues. The relationship has grown in wonderful, organic ways since then. The young men from these two NGOs attend all the major public events organized by the women’s organizations, providing whatever support they can. Working with the women’s groups, they are now involved in anti-communalism activism as well (a big change, since their groups had been exclusively focused on MSM sexual behaviour). One of the women’s organizations recently conducted a gender training programme with the *kothis* linked to Bharosa Trust, exploring issues such as roles and power within relationships’ (Sharma and Nath: 2005: 95).

short-hand for 'queerness', it did the same work'. *Sexuality* was not treated as a simple identity that could be 'added and stirred' with other issues, or simply respected as 'choice' or 'difference', it had to be read back into the fabric of *everyone's* experience.

Sexuality, within this use, was less about minoritizing, less about drawing a particular catchment area, less about unquestioningly buying into the terms of *homosexual* or *heterosexual*. The word was used with an expanded function, where everyone's day to day relation with their world had to be taken into account. The idea of intersectionality – that *each of us* is made up of a variable cluster of social situations and desires – was used to revamp *sexuality*. The word was then used as much to challenge the category of the 'heterosexual', how painfully it is propped up, how it is kept in place in society by a range of controls.<sup>44</sup> The idea of sexuality here worked not simply as an answer to 'what is your sexuality' but instead as having something to do with everyone's sexual experience, as a rallying point for ensuring their day to day freedoms and choices.

Gautam, along with friend and co-editor Arvind, was to later include feminist scholar Nivedita Menon's pivotal essay 'How Natural is Normal? Feminism and Compulsory Heterosexuality' on the concept of *queerness* as a conceptual launching pad for their 2005 book *Because*. Menon was a friend and political ally of many of the members of PRISM. Her essay inaugurated and set

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<sup>44</sup> One of the most abiding legacies of the discipline of sexology and psychoanalysis is the category of the *heterosexual*. The main plot as an afterthought, as a necessity for letting the *homosexual* be the subplot, the variation. '[T]he period stretching roughly between Wilde and Proust,' American writer Eve K. Sedgwick wrote, [also the period of the sexologists and of Freud] was prodigally productive of attempts to name, explain, and define this new kind of creature, the homosexual person – a project so urgent that it spawned in its rage of distinction an ever newer category, that of the heterosexual person' (Sedgwick; 1990: 82-3).

the tone for the section on 'Conceptual Approaches to Sexuality as a Form of Politics'. Politically thus inflected, the word-concept of sexuality exceeded its classificatory function, doubled its meanings. The idea travelled promiscuously. In those 'early days' of sexuality activism in Delhi, the dailiness of the idea of sexuality mixed and matched the many histories of the term. Sexual identity, rather than simply being thought of as a condition, or as an indelible marker, was framed as a complex situation, something temporal, something flexible, as always an unfinal process. '[A]ll of us are,' Menon signed off her essay by noting, 'or have the potential to be – 'queer'', critical of social norms (2005: 39). With this, the idea of sexuality carried on its game, sometimes contracting, sometimes expanding. This is how the concept remained animated, remained double. This is how it works politically. Travelling, varying, being capable of change.

### **(iii) The Art of Personal Narratives I: The Many Legacies of *Sexuality***

Asking the question '[d]o social struggles give rise to new forms of literature,' John Beverley tries to account for the preponderance of testimonial narratives within various social struggle contexts in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (1989: 11). These contexts are exhaustively productive of narratives which are 'told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or a witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience' (12-13).

In a bid to historicize this genre, Beverley locates it within an 'emergence of new forms of cultural and literary expression that embody, in more or less thematically explicit and formally articulated ways, the social forces contending for power in the world today' (12). He has in



mind 'not only the struggle of working people everywhere against exploitation, but also in contingent ways movements of ethnic or national liberation, the women's liberation movement, poor and oppressed peoples' organizations of all types, the gay rights movement, the peace movement, ecological activism, and the like' (*ibid.*).

One of the new forms of literature given rise by these movements, he states, is embodied by 'the kind of narrative text that in Latin American Spanish has come to be called *testimonio*' (*ibid.*). Although Beverley is able to distinguish between forms such as 'autobiography' and 'testimonio', he also acknowledges an insistent overlap between these genres both of which rely on a recounting and transcribing of one's personal experience. For instance, he notes that the 'forms of women's writing, and...U.S. black, Latino, and gay literature' (*ibid.* 23) may be characterized somewhere between an 'autobiography' and 'testimonio' as such. These are the sites where personal experiences, which are the constituents of any 'autobiography', are recounted and compiled within defined political frameworks of struggle for equality and rights, highlighting their role as political texts, whether for 'blacks', for 'women' or for 'homosexuals'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The history of politically framed testimonial literature or life-stories in India is routed through the usage of this genre in feminist and Dalit movements. Writing of its importance, Arnold and Blackburn insist that '[t]his [genre] is of particular value in seeking to understand and analyse groups that are socially marginalised and hence not normally heard, such as women and Dalits ("Untouchables"). As many of the titles in this type of scholarship attest, finding the "voice" of the otherwise apparently voiceless has a force propelling the investigation of life histories as a whole, and not least in South Asia; in this way, the life-history approach is a means of breaking the silences imposed by society and history.' (Arnold and Blackburn; 2004: 6) The titular function of *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* has to be located in this historical context of Indian feminist and Dalit movements which it learns from and cites.

It should not be surprising that these forms coalesced as 'a new narrative genre in the 1960s and further develop[ed] in close relation to the movements for national liberation and the generalized cultural radicalism of that decade' (13). The 1960s and 70s, as we have noted earlier, also mark the working of 'gay' and 'lesbian' identity politics in Europe and America that would come to criss-cross with the political idiom of similar movements around the world. That *the personal was political* was almost common-sensical as the reigning frame of these idioms. The personal narratives quoted within this framework would inevitably, and strategically, take recourse to the *homosexual subject* but also, crucially enough, disperse it.

This chapter would focus on personal narratives from three such activist publications in India that cite such narratives to outline those moments of recourse and dispersal. They are: Delhi-based AIDS Bhedbhaav Virodhi Andolan's (AIDS Anti-Discrimination Movement's) *Less than Gay: A Citizens' Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India* (1991), Bhan and Narrain's *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (2005) and Vidya Shah and Aditya Bondyopadhyay's *My Body is Not Mine: Stories of Violence and Tales of Hope: Voices from the Kothi Community in India* (2007). All the personal narratives, cited in them, can be read in two ways: (a) as experiences of someone who inhabits a defined subject-position, *gay* or *lesbian*, as evidences of this subject-position, and (b) as experiences which are constitutive instances in the very making and unmaking of that subject-position, of its real-time use and irrelevance, of the double game that is identity politics (Scott 1991). The second reading, I will argue, leaves the first one far behind both in its precision and excitement.

The substance of most of the life-stories and personal narratives included within these publications is the substance of memory and experience. 'One early winter afternoon I had

come home with my friend...' (Parivaraj; 1991: 9). There are repeated efforts of going back and pulling from the past the material that can be cited to make the immediate narrative possible in the present. There is a heady refusal to forget, as it were. 'For as long as I remember, I was always referred to as chakka in school' (Saria; 2005: 267). There is an incitement to recall and to retrospectively order a life that would lead up to and account for the present, which would style a life to make it immediately quotable. 'Manish Mali liked to play with dolls and do household chores from a very early age. When he was 5 years old he began to realize that he was different from other boys' (Bondyopadhyay and Shah; 2007: 42).

A specific kind of narrative is fashioned out of the abundant material of this past. There is an apparent limiting of possible tellings that could have potentially taken place, selection of instances, choosing of themes, working with specific ideas. For if you ask a particular question, all the material in front of you tends to get orchestrated only as a possible answer to that question. If you were to ask '[w]hat is so different or so special about queer life...[w]hat is its everyday nature composed of,' as Bhan and Narrain do, you will get tentative answers only to this question (2005: 25). Personal narratives are contextual responses to calls for narrating a particular kind of life. The genre of the personal narrative is a rhetorical action best suited to this situation, this kind of asking and telling. The narratives of lives are always informed by the circumstances which prompted their preparation in the first place.

In other words, editors have as much a role to play as writers. The motivation of the publication styles the published material. Bhan and Narrain, in preparing *Because I Have a Voice*, circulated a call for contributions which stated that the attempt is 'to put together writings on queer sexuality both from a conceptual viewpoint as well as from *more grounded experience based*

*viewpoint*' to highlight 'the everyday realities of queer lives' (Narrain; prsnl email: {original April 2004} April, 2009, emphasis mine). 'We hope to have some sort of a documentation of the struggles as well as the personal reflections of *queer people*' (*ibid.*: emphasis mine). It further states that '[w]e are particularly interested in looking at personal narratives...our *experiences as queer people* living in this country' (*ibid.*: emphasis mine). In preparing the section 'stories of struggle', Bhan and Narrain 'asked [their]...writers – all of whom are activists in the queer movement – to write about their own *experiences*, looking at their lives as activists and *as queer people*' (2005: 20). In fact coinages like 'queer life', 'gay life', 'queer existence' or 'lesbian existence' are common within these publications and experiences recalled are treated as diverse data of these given *lives so defined* (*ibid.* 14; Kale; 1991: 9; Bhan and Narrain: 2005: 26; *ibid.*).

Joan W. Scott in her essay 'The Evidence of Experience' marks the collusion of this repeated invocation of the category of *experience* with an inability to question the grounds of how those subjects whose experiences are being told and retold are historically made possible in the first place (1991). They treat their subject categories as eternal and outside history, as it were. Bhan and Narrain, however, do a double game. This is crucial to how we conceive the very moment of assertion of sexual identity, to our ability to read it accurately. At many instances, the two editors use the categories casually, as a matter of fact, outside quotation marks, in order to mark people, but at other instances they also supply the histories of these terms, what made them historically persuasive, what are rhetorical uses and harms of such use, what makes them frustrating and exciting at times. Their text jumps unpredictably between these two tracks. The book works out the doubleness of identity politics. 'We never had a pretension,' Gautam told

me, 'it was never a truth telling book, we were trying to summarize all the differences of opinion, all the separate strands that we saw' (prsnl interview). 'Let's put this together, let's capture the moment we said,' in preparing the book, and the 'moment itself was of all sorts' (*ibid.*).

Bhan and Narrain rely heavily on the category of experience in order to conceptualize *queer lives*. 'When the evidence offered is the evidence of 'experience,' the claim for referentiality is further buttressed - what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation - as a foundation on which analysis is based - that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference' (Scott: *ibid.* 777). Lesbian and gay political movements, Scott argued, 'take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it' (*ibid.*). I want to argue that the watershed moments of identity politics, such as the publication of a book like *Because*, have to be read carefully to see that identity is not doing any one thing there. That moments such as these cannot be read as a simple naturalization of 'difference' because the very thrust of these moments is double. Self-evidence of identities is not sustained in them.

Earlier, we saw how the *homosexual subject* came to be imagined at certain points in history. The activist agenda strategically remembers and omits this history. Bhan and Narrain both pedestalize and demystify the *homosexual*. The 'ground-breaking' assertion that they were trying to make with the book sent the *sexual map* of gay and straight rushing forth into the

public sphere.<sup>46</sup> However, the contradictions of this sexual map also travelled publically, its difficulties, the moments when it comes apart, when it overwhelms its uses by its nuisances.<sup>47</sup> Bhan and Narrain wrote that '[k]ey to this act of political resistance is the formation of identities that arise out of understanding of one's sexuality' (2005: 13). *Sexuality* functioning as a foundational concept, as an 'understanding', as a deeply emotive turn in people's lives, as a 'shared sense' (*ibid.*). '...a sexually defined group,' Narrain's favorite queer theorist had written, 'is itself a mode of sociability' (Warner; 1993: xxiv). For Bhan and Narrain, sexuality becomes this sort of a ground, both questioned and unquestionable. Sexuality both as the etiological cause of sexual experience, one's inner property, but also as something possible, something

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<sup>46</sup> The book was reviewed almost immediately in mainstream Indian dailies like the *Hindustan Times*, *The Times of India* and *The Indian Express* and several other smaller publications. 'In publishing,' Gautam said, 'it had made a splash, it was one of the first queer books to do that' (prsnl interview).

<sup>47</sup> The sexological/psychoanalytic history of the *homosexual* identity continues to insist itself in the very mode people imagine, talk of and write about homosexual identity within contemporary activism. Giving the example of the lesbian and gay support group meetings in Bangalore, Vinay Chandran and Arvind Narrain write that '[t]he issues raised and discussed in a support group are the same ones that are raised with psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and counselors. Issues of *self-identity*, marriage pressures, *coming out* to friends and family are spoken of regularly in these meetings' (emphasis mine; Chandran and Narrain; 2005: 67-8). Chandran and Narrain's claim that LGBT movements pose an 'epistemological challenge' to the psychiatric characterization of 'homosexuality' as a distinct disease and as a specific object of knowledge from an assumed heterosexist position. This challenge is partially qualified by the double game that these political movements play. They build upon the sexuality-as-self's-inner-truth perspective, the cornerstone of psychoanalysis as much as they put it into relief. The Freudian psychoanalytic sessions, like the counseling sessions in today's Bangalore, treated the past life experiences of its patients as data that would explain the state. The drive of the telling of personal experiences during psychoanalytic sessions was structured as etiological, in order to account where it all started and how. The drive of the genre of commissioned personal narratives, as we notice in this chapter, is not remarkably different. Homosexuality, if now not a disease, is still distinct, locked in a contract of difference from heterosexuality, as an object of repetitious narration and elaboration. Sexuality activism both overplays and underplays this distinction depending on the situation at hand.

useful only after experiences of discriminations, as temporarily important to stage a struggle, to fight by taking over terms. Foundation as worn. Inner property as something put together.

The call to narrate does not simply refer to the potential narrative but also configures it in advance. Bhan and Narrain tend to further provide the crucial narrative points for such an imagining of *gay* or *lesbian life*, framing them as generalizable: 'Perhaps emblematic of the struggles of queer people around the world is the act of 'coming out' – the first voicing of our desires to ourselves and then to others – which has a central place in defining queer identity' (2005: 24). These narrative points could progressively crystallize and pose as necessities for any narrative to be recognized as gay or lesbian. The motivation of inclusion of narratives in publications such as Bhan and Narrain's is that they are unique yet generalizable. The tendency is to encompass everyone, to cue all with a few: '*We have all* come out to a friend,' the editors write, 'and realized that they know next to nothing about same-sex desire. *We have all* ached to tell our parents...' (2005: 11, emphasis mine). The drive towards generalizability marks their inclusion as politically *exemplary* texts.

The Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben talks of the use of examples. 'In any context,' he says, 'where it exerts its force, the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these' (2003: Section III). The example is 'one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity' (*ibid.*). Bhan and Narrain are caught in a bit of a quandary, one which you always confront in the game of offering examples. They want their personal narratives to be representative but not dictative,

suggestive but not prescriptive. 'These [personal] narratives,' they say, 'are perhaps the most telling reminder that there is no one queer reality and that there is not just one, but indeed many, queer struggles' (2005: 20). They want a sort of functional coherence that is required both theoretically and practically for constituting an identity, and any politics based on it. They try and work this by a limited set of recognizable narrative cues, such as *coming out*, *community*, *pride*, *resistance*, *gay life*, *lesbian identity et. al.* but also never fail to remind their readers that each of these cues will work in a different way for dissimilar people, times and contexts. That for some, these cues would not even be relevant. In that sense, the question of sexuality even in this moment of watershed assertion, remains open-ended, remains double.

'Genre[s]', Francesca Orsini notes, have a 'peculiar tendency: to lead the reader into thinking that its own partial view is in fact the whole' (2006: 3). 'Each genre codifies a particular correspondence,' she writes, 'between signifiers and signified, and thus establishes its own language, its own rhetoric' (*ibid.*). 'But while each genre carves up the world and limits the universe of discourse according to its partial intention, it presents itself to the reader as a whole' (*ibid.*). This is both the lure and the danger of *queer life* as genre, the risk of such a book as *Because*. This is also why Bhan and Narrain never feel they have reached quite something like the genre of *queer life* in their book. Instead 'queer lives', for them, became not a genre but a kind of 'living theory' that has 'much to teach...about news ways of relating, of expressing desire and relating to notions of our identities and our selves, and ultimately new notions of personhood' (2005: 13).

It seems that there was a distinct effort on the part of the young editors to not let their casual usage of the terms such as gay or lesbian solidify into an eternal *type* or *species*. Pushing forth



his early passionate training in intersectionality, Bhan was given to see and work with differences in class, gender and caste as having an undeniable effect on the many social lives of sexuality. The idea of sexuality remained no longer effectively an unchanging inner thing but a constantly moving, altering factor, now overplayed, now not. It did not freeze into a genre, which is etymologically allied with *genus*, Greek for race or kind.<sup>48</sup> Sexuality, as it was worked out in Bhan and Narrain's selection of narratives, was not meant to constitute a genre, not meant to flower into a distinct form, or work as prescriptive model for a good queer life.

The doubleness of their project, its efforts and confusions, was reflected in these narratives. Bhan and Narrain, despite being surprised as to how much of the book came as a response to the email call, also had to chase after several of their friends for contributing to the book. One such friend was Ali Potia who had grown up in Bombay, who had participated in an early *Nigah* open mic in Delhi, and who at the time of writing for the book worked as a corporate trainer in Colombo. His small personal story 'Islam and Me' tells us how the personal narratives work, how their text makes and unmakes sexual identity, how it cites its psychoanalytic history only to exceed it, how it tackles the demand for simultaneous uniqueness and generalizability of their stories. In his piece, even as Ali proudly claims his 'gay' identity, he disenchants its adoption, denaturalizes the category, giving us a heady scene of the double game.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Genre always informs the content which it apparently only allocates. Like Greek *tupos*, source of 'type', which means a 'blow, impression' the sense is of striking. Forms and kinds emerge from the impressions made by such a striking.

<sup>49</sup> In a 2007 essay, akshay khanna frames similar issues as slippages between *subjection* and *subjectivation* where *subjection* may imply 'a 'calling upon' to understand one's experiences in certain terms' (Khanna; 2007: 178), the editorial gesture par excellence, and *subjectivation* implies that 'there may be, equally, other ways in which to understand oneself and, indeed, a drive *not* to make sense of particular experiences' (*ibid.*). 'How we make sense

Freud's homosexual was a result of a story, of a particular format of telling lives. Of a space clearing gesture for an 'inner' sphere and then imagining a tale of conflict and resolutions within this sphere. In asking Potia for a piece for their book, the editors had made a non-incidental suggestion of the format. 'As I started thinking what this piece would be about,' Potia begins, 'I was reminded of the word 'journey'. He had said to me, 'you could just reflect on your own journey in negotiating your faith and sexuality' (2005: 252). The editors were doing something very common. The format of the journey triggered the expectation of looking back on the roads travelled and commenting on them. This was squarely in the legacy of the Freudian call to look back, to retrospectively arrange a narrative by selecting episodes, prioritizing them, making sequence. Louis Althusser calls this 'pre-appointment', our particular ways of expecting things, our ways of expecting particular narrations for explaining those things.<sup>50</sup> The idea is that once the format has been suggested, the material gravitates around it,

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of an experience or participate in it may be different from the way we are 'called upon' to' (*ibid.*). khanna, of course, elaborates on how these slippages work in his thesis (see khanna: 2010).

<sup>50</sup> 'Freud shows,' Althusser's full comment reads, 'that individuals are always 'abstract' with respect to the subjects they always-already are, simply by noting the ideological ritual that surrounds the expectation of a 'birth', that 'happy event'. Everyone knows how much and in what way an unborn child is expected. Which amounts to saying, very prosaically, if we agree to drop the 'sentiments', i.e. the forms of family ideology (paternal/maternal conjugal/fraternal) in which the unborn child is expected: it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived. I hardly need add that this familial ideological configuration is, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and that it is in this implacable and more or less 'pathological' (presupposing that any meaning can be assigned to that term) structure that the former subject to-be will have to 'find' 'its' place, i.e. 'become' the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance. It is clear that this ideological constraint and *pre-appointment*, and all the rituals of rearing and then education in the family, have some relationship with what Freud studied in

tries to make sense by it, resists it. 'Little does he know,' Ali wrote, however, of one the editors, 'that it's hardly been one at all. I guess my journey with regard to my faith and sexuality has only been equivalent to me picking my mode of transport and strapping myself in. It's far too early for me to look back on the road I've travelled and comment on it, but I will try' (*ibid.*). Once the format takes over, the narrator seals the pact with the editorial expectation and begins on the journey. The call precipitates this kind of narrative, a reflection on something that till now lay fallow, a journey of something that till now was not written out in this way. Even as Potia seals this pact, he acknowledges right at that moment, a sort of mismatch between the editorial call and his own story – *little does he know* – a mismatch that he works with, works around and works against.

'I have struggled with the question of identity,' Potia writes, 'for a few months' (*ibid.* 253). He poses this question, predictably enough, to his 'inner voice', using a widely available vocabulary of self-reflection, the general rhetorical setting of personal story telling, especially after Freud. For him, the piece becomes a trigger point, a 'cathartic attempt' to work out the question of whether he really identifies himself as a 'gay Muslim'. Citing quotations from the *Quran* and the *Hadiths* of Prophet Mohammed as his epigraphs, Potia observes that 'the Islamic religious tradition leaves very little room for the interpretation of homosexuality as legitimate within the orthodoxy of the faith'. '[L]iberal Islam,' he notes, 'simply advocates the lesser of two evils – social ostracism instead of death'. Faced with such 'overt hostility' he renounces the project of finding 'legitimacy within the faith'. He drops 'the word 'Muslim' from...[his] list of identities

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the forms of the pre-genital and genital 'stages' of sexuality, i.e. in the 'grip' of what Freud registered by its effects as being the unconscious' ((1970) 1971, emphasis mine).

precisely because,' as he says, 'if I subscribe to an identity, I would like to embrace it completely. I can't be a proper and correct Muslim the way the term is defined, and also be a homosexual without exposing double standards in my beliefs' (*ibid.* 254). 'The two terms, Queer and Muslim,' he seems to have concluded, 'are mutually exclusive right now'.

Potia seems to have done the job. Worked out a relation between his 'faith' and his 'sexuality'. If he can not be a *proper and correct* Muslim, he will be none at all. If he will embrace any identity, he will *embrace it completely*. '[W]e are willing to stand outside the courtyard [of the Mosque],' he writes, 'with our rainbow flags and Cher CDs telling everybody our message. We will enter only when you also let in that big contingent of unveiled, single women and don't make us put the rainbow flags away or mute the Cher'. Till then, Potia seems to suggest, we stand apart. When the editors tried to introduce Potia's piece, they noted that his 'effort at reconciling the different parts of his identity brings him up against a blank wall' (2005: 26).

If we read only the moments of declaration in Potia's piece, the moments where he sounds confident and decisive, we would have to wrap up our analysis right about here. However, *identity is a lived thing*. It does not simply reside in the neat moments of its declaration, in the events of its utterance. Instead, it is realized in its dailiness where it is overemphasized and underplayed, worn and abandoned. Even as he claims to embrace or dispose of identities *completely*, Potia offers evidence only to the contrary. Even as he establishes homosexuality as an involuntary 'orientation', ratified by his 'inner voice' he offers other entry-points to the idea of sexuality, other ways of conceptualizing it. In sum, his narrative proves that even the moment of proud assertion is always double. In its everydayness, sexuality is always already a

partial, unfinal thing. That there is no complete embrace, that there is no proper and correct way of being gay or Muslim.

Despite having claimed the watertightness of his 'Muslim' and 'gay' identities, their mutual exclusiveness, Potia offers situational meeting points. Where he merges them for a tactical purpose. Here, he offers a version of the everyday which does not stand the test of his declarations, which bend those utterances, qualify them repeatedly. 'Apparently,' he notes, 'there is a certain, how do you say, *je ne sais quoi* about being Muslim and gay in some quarters of Indian queer society. Most everyone, except hardened RSS types, find Pakistani, Kashmiri and Afghan men hot' (*ibid.* 255). 'That works in my favour,' Potia notes with a particular relish, 'but it's a precise masquerade – no different than someone being 'masculine' or describing himself as 'gym-fit' on his online profile' (*ibid.*). Identity is this temporal game of playing different aspects up and down, of entering and exiting contracts depending on situations. It is a constant working out. After mentioning the rainbow flags, the Cher CDs, the Oscar Wilde books, the Streisand concert tickets, and the campiest reference in all of Hollywood, Judy Garland's Dorothy, he quickly writes, 'Yes, I'm playing up the stereotypes' (258). If Potia's narrative offers any place, it is that shifting place of play, it is that knack that he is participating in an elaborate game. 'So what is identity after all,' Potia risks the question and responds in the next line, 'I'm not even attempt to go there' (*ibid.* 257). Constantly deferring the *going there*, he withholds the complete embrace which he had offered earlier.

Even in terms of history of ideas, Potia latches onto more than one meaning of the word-concept of sexuality. He offsets one connotation with another. At one point, he distinctly pegs onto the universalizable scope of sexual identity, seeing it as something basic and internal to

everyone. '[T]here are thousands of people in India whose orientation may be gay, but whose preference is not' (*ibid.* 253). Where Potia saw his Muslimness overtly as a burden of 'culture', his gayness was somehow outside 'culture', sexuality as something implicit in him, in everyone. He believes in a 'rational discourse about sexuality and faith,' and sexuality – gay or straight – was seen as built into the makeup of every individual, implied in their inner voice (*ibid.* 255). It seems that Potia was 'driven to translate diverse sexual behaviours, desires and politics into language that finds its base in the idea of sexuality as personhood' (khanna; 2005: 93). At another point in the same piece however, he lets go of this idea and instead situates 'sexuality' in the larger sense of *sexualness* of people, in how they physically radiate desires and affects. He locates sexuality not as an abstract inner thing, as if to each his own, but instead as a bodily experience, triggered by, as he writes, his 'body's physical message' that 'tells...[him] that he is attracted to men' (254). In this *physical message*, sexuality exceeds its Freudian story of mental growth and inner development, of something having misfired in the mind and resulted in a separate species of sorts. Instead, it is located in the real-time pushes and pulls of the body, of the many and uncentered ways in which our bodies make us gravitate towards something or someone. These pushes and pulls, as such, cannot be taxonomized into being of one kind or another. The sexual map of gay and straight is only one of the many ways of reading these pushes and pulls.

In the immediate aftermath of the Delhi High court judgment in July 2009, when the North Indian Hindu godman Baba Ramdev claimed that he could treat 'homosexuality' with Yogic practices of dhyān, concentration, and pranayam, breathing exercises and control, he was conflating precisely these two ways of looking at sexual experience, these two long-drawn

histories of ideas (Jain: 2009). He was at once referring to 'homosexuality', a separate, cognizable thing in medical and psychiatric science, in law and in public politics. Yet, he was also latching onto a more generalizable frame of the indiscriminate sexual desires of the body, of its inopportune excesses, of its intemperate corruptions, one that was widely available in the Pandey Beechan Sharma 'Ugra' oeuvre. These excesses, Ramdev believed, could be checked by reining the body in, of setting it within the bodily disciplines and repetitious routines of Yoga. Potia, like Ramdev, invokes more than one entry-point to sexuality. He confuses and transforms the word-concept in this process, adds to its possible meanings, keeps its functions animated. Near the end of his piece, Potia's usages again play with the many logics of the concept of sexuality. He begins the climactic paragraph by suggesting that 'sexuality' works in terms of *being gay or being straight*. 'I see no problems,' he writes confidently, 'in defining my identity exclusively in terms of my sexuality. After all, being gay is about so much more than just sex' (258).

It is very exciting however to note where he places *sexuality*, how he conceptualizes *being gay*. To note as to what he thinks composes this fact of being gay, what it is effectively made up of. 'My queer, urban family and I,' he writes, 'have much more in common with each other than just the fact that we sleep with members of the same sex. We face the same discriminations, we fight the same battles, and we share the same spaces' (*ibid.*). Sexual identity connoting not so much the sameness of *who we are* but instead the sameness of *what we share*. No longer simply an autobiographical conceit, it draws attention to social attitudes. It works out the collectivity not in terms of a bodily profiling of species, pace the sexologists, or a mental profiling of a kind of people, pace the Freudian psychoanalysts. Instead it finds collectivity in the

political questions we share, in the problems we collectively face, in the spaces we ache to create.

Once collectivity is defined this way, it immediately humbles itself. It cannot be extended to an abstract everyone, to some sort of community extending beyond these overt points of commonality. It makes clear that sameness is not a given, is not simply present inside each individual. If the questions that people face on a day to day basis change, if social spaces alter, if political economies change, then the community already stands interrupted. It is not a natural, self-evident bond, and it is certainly not self-generating and ever-present. For Potia, it is his unapologetic 'queer, urban family', English-speaking, middle or upper class, students or working professionals. He does not pretend to speak on behalf of anyone else. His version of a coming together is more political, more provisional. The umbrella of a community will be provisionally shared only if the problems remain the same. If the problems change, if self-descriptions vary or if the political viewpoints alter, another kind of community will have to be thought up. *Being gay* would not suffice.

In Narrain's and Bhan's book, the personal narratives offer up contesting versions of the concept of sexuality. In the same narrative, more than one strand of it is picked up, persevered with and played with. Authors simultaneously follow and distance themselves from the frameworks of their telling. The very act of narrativization works through the many lives of a concept. Elsewhere in the book, Pawan Dhall in 'Solitary Cruiser' foregrounds this implicit tendency. He writes that 'it is useful and healing at times to distance oneself from the politics of the queer scene and look at it and myself more objectively' (2005: 121). He writes of sexual identity as always being in a process of change. Of the inability of sexual identity to capture *all*



sexual experience. Talking of friends, activists, lovers, parents and cousins, he writes that '[a]ll these people and many more have and still are shaping my politics as a sexual being and as a human being...Their actions encourage me to look at myself in new ways, even if for a hearty laugh. For instance, I am beginning to consider identifying as 'a gay man who is straight, curious, and sometimes thrilled with frills'' (122).

The personal narrative, as the genre most inextricably tied to the self, only presents it as an uneven and an unpredictable process. Responding to an editorial call, putting together the stories of the self, the episodes of one's life and the feelings one has felt, one ends up producing a text with diverse motivations and conceptual directions. Read thoroughly, read with and beyond its declarative moments, the text of the personal narratives ends up reflecting not a simple reign of one meaning of sexuality, but instead, its many uses, its many suggestions, its many contexts. They are not so much the stories of readymade people and terms, they are in fact the stories of the making and undoing of these terms and people, of their live pulls and pushes. Read thus, the narratives which seductively offer a subject-position also withhold it, keep it churning, keep it politically animated. They reference but only inventively. They are sincere but also parodically self-conscious. They play with the idea of essence and also simultaneously disenchant it. They are double in the deepest sense of the term.

#### **(iv) The Art of Personal Narratives II: On the Inconsistent Text**

'...the sexual minorities support group. One of the rituals in this new form of collectivisation is the round of introductions. At a support group meeting one announces one's name, and one's 'sexuality'. Two

observations I make with respect to this ritual – one, that many clearly state that 'before coming to this support group I did not 'know' that I was a kothi or a bisexual'. The support group is about the naming of oneself, recognizing oneself within certain terms, 'identifying' oneself...often one finds that in one support group meeting a person identifies with one category. Two weeks later the person has changed to another category, only to perhaps revert to the first in another few weeks. This often evokes laughter in the group, as though identification were a joke.' (khanna; 2008: 100-1)

In the genre of personal narratives, in the life-stories, sexual identity works as a name. Like any name, it does not appear all throughout the narrative. It cannot be stretched out. It punctuates the text at specific points in ways that can only be described as tactical. The personal-narratives are the fields of this tactical play.

Sometimes it is used to refer directly to oneself. 'I am Indian and *gay*' (Saria; 2005: 267, emphasis mine). Sometimes it points out the social worlds and contexts of the narrator. 'He kept his *gay* and *straight* worlds totally separate' (Pattanaik; 2005: 246, emphasis mine). Or '[f]or most of us, our *gay* and *straight* lives are laid out like a chess board' (Sandip; 1991: 12, emphasis mine). Sometimes it works as a way to index people to recall them later, much like using their proper names. 'At the end of the conversation, Mrs. B. took out her address book to show scores of addresses of *gay* people in Delhi - friends of her son. They were all listed under 'G', for *Gay*' (*Less Than Gay*, 1991: 13, emphasis mine).

Sometimes it is an abuse. 'How many of us have heard men call a woman who is competent, 'tough', not available, 'a bloody *lesbian*' as a way of dismissing her?' (R.A.; 1991: 13, emphasis mine). Sometimes it is an obscure sign, either more or less absent or relatively unknown or as something which was unknown in the past. '*Lihaaf* does not contain any such words. In those

days, the word '*lesbianism*' was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child's description of something which she cannot fully understand. It was based on my own experience as a child' (Chughtai quoted in *Less than Gay*; 1991: 27, emphasis mine).<sup>51</sup>

Sometimes it works as a shorthand, a strategy to avoid stress, to evade boring repetitions. 'Now, if my cousins decided to 'drop in' what would I do about my multi-coloured postcard, which had just one word printed on it in large font: 'homo'? So how does one go about this: shall I simply put up the postcard on my door so everyone knows and I am spared the ordeal of repeating the same banal detail to each one' (Tejani; 2005: 272). The name itself becomes banal. Sometimes

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<sup>51</sup> Ismat Chughtai's short-story *Lihaaf* was published in 1941. The narrator's voice is of a young girl. She writes about the few days she spent in her aunt's house. The relationship of her aunt and the house maid, Rabbu, presents itself to the young girl in several ways, not all of which she can put in words. The story was banned by the then colonial State government on charges of obscenity. Ismat Chughtai fought the charges in the Lahore High Court and finally won the law-suit. In the deepest sense, her victory was based on the many lives and motivations within single word-concepts, how they behave variedly depending on the ways they get looked at. In her autobiography Chughtai recalls the day in the Lahore High Court, remembers how the case crumbled: 'There was a big crowd in the court. Several people had advised us to offer our apologies to the judge, even offering to pay the fines on our behalf. The proceedings had lost some of their verve, the witnesses who were called in to prove that "Lihaaf" was obscene were beginning to lose their nerve in the face of our lawyer's cross-examination. No word capable of inviting condemnation could be found. After a great deal of searching a gentleman said, "The sentence 'she was collecting 'ashiqs' (lovers) is obscene." / "Which word is obscene," the lawyer asked. "'Collecting,' or "'ashiqs'?" / "The word "'ashiqs,'" the witness replied, somewhat hesitantly. / "My Lord, the word "'ashiqs' has been used by the greatest poets and has also been used in na'ts. This word has been given a sacred place by the devout." / "But it is highly improper for girls to collect "'ashiqs,'" the witness proclaimed. / "Why?" / "Because ... because ... this is improper for respectable girls." / "But not improper for girls who are not respectable?" / "Uh ... uh ... no." / "My client has mentioned girls who are perhaps not respectable. And as you say, sir, non-respectable girls may collect 'ashiqs.'" / "Yes. It's not obscene to mention them, but for an educated woman from a respectable family to write about these girls merits condemnation!" / The witness thundered. / "So go right ahead and condemn as much as you like, but does it merit legal action?" / The case crumbled' (tr. Tahira Naqvi and Muhammad Umar Memon, quoted in Danish Khan: 2010).

it is a hope to bring together people under an umbrella, as a name that can be shared, as a relationship that can be initiated with others who are felt to be in similar situations, who feel like they are going through the same feelings, the same experiences. The list is long.

There is no denotative consistency in the way *lesbian* or *gay* is used. The terms are repeatedly denied the consistency of a referral to the self, are interrupted as ontological categories. Instead, they are realized in their many kinds of employments. They appear in varied fields of temporality and usage. For instance, in the phrase *lesbian sex*, the main object of description is not the person, but instead, her sexual actions, the field of her desires. Here, the word suits itself to this particular usage. At other times the words are used mainly to suggest participation in a certain *gay* or *lesbian* community, in a certain gay or lesbian fashion, or look, or lifestyle. There, the categories exceed the person and become the names for a trend, for an entire visual culture or an urban mis-en-scene. One with which the person herself has an oblique, changing relationship. Personal narratives constitute this varying relationship of the vocabulary of sexuality with the narratorial voice. The concepts are mediated through a usage that is perhaps akin to the tactical way in which we deploy names.

Desire for the same-sex has had a disorderly relationship with the practice of names. The teasing frequency of that phrase – '[t]he love that dare not speak its name' – from the English writer Oscar Wilde's young lover Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas's 1894 undergraduate poem, *Two Loves*, in many subsequent academic essay-titles, pop journalism and poetic references to same-sex desire should not be entirely surprising.<sup>52</sup> The *name* and *the love that cannot be named* are

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<sup>52</sup> The last few lines of the now popular poem, as printed in *The Chameleon* in 1894 in England are:

"...Sweet youth,

always mutually implicated. The name distinguishes it, obscures it, minoritizes it and plays with it. The professed inability to name, as against an indifference to it, has effectively the same conceit as naming. It is the other side of the same coin. The name does not simply refer to something, it makes it referable in particular ways. The deployment of names, however, this game of referring itself, is always uneven and impartial in narrative time and space.

The French social scientist Michel de Certeau has elaborated on this tactical nature of the deployment of names, on the necessary inability of names to fully determine the entities and people they describe. His history of names is the history of their use, of their real-time lives. He talks of the names of the urban streets in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Paris and the ways in which they are variously used by Parisians. The name is put to many jobs and refers to different things at different times. It is here that urban time and space and narrative time and space yield a very useful analogy.

'What is it that they spell out', de Certeau asks of street-names, '[d]isposed in constellations that hierarchize and semantically order the surface of the city, operating chronological

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Tell me why, sad and sighing, thou dost rove  
These pleasant realms? I pray thee speak me sooth  
What is thy name?' He said, 'My name is Love.'  
Then straight the first did turn himself to me  
And cried, 'He lieth, for his name is Shame,  
But I am Love, and I was wont to be  
Alone in this fair garden, till he came  
Unasked by night; I am true Love, I fill  
The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame.'  
Then sighing, said the other, 'Have thy will,  
I am the love that dare not speak its name.'"

arrangements and historical justifications, these words (*Borrego, Botzaris, Bougainville...*) slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition. *Saints-Peres, Corentin Celton, Red Square...* these names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passers-by' (1984: 104). The names, and what they precisely connote, have habit of fluctuating. They 'detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meeting points on itineraries which, as metaphors, they determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recognized or not by passers-by' (*ibid.*).

In the real time of usage, names wear out. Usage does not simply strengthen them, repetition does not simply boost their hold, it humbles them, twists them, relativises them. Usage can do unpredictable things to names. *Gay* and *lesbian* work in a temporal arrangement of a narrative in which they do not stretch evenly. They are picked up and dropped as self-definitions, qualified without much notice. 'Two weeks later the person has changed to another category, only to perhaps revert to the first in another few weeks. This often evokes laughter in the [support] group, as though identification were a joke' (khanna: *ibid.*).

The joke is not specific to some narratives. The inconsistency, that is the premise of this joke, is generalizable. Inconsistency that is of several sorts. Even those narratives which claim identification as *gay* or *lesbian* with pride, which are invested in these terms, carry on a tactical game of names. Sometimes it is sexuality as one's truth, as a whelming name. *I am lesbian*. At other times, it is not so much the name that takes centre stage, but the general feeling of *sameness* that it instigates with others. The name once deployed, fades, becomes banal. Once you do the formality of filling up the dating-website form, once you plug in the word *gay* or

*lesbian* at the beginning, then you go on to find plenty of people who are in the same situation as you, pursuing one another, flirting, sharing stories, comparing notes, sexing it up.

At other times, this name is left behind for other criteria of difference, such as how one carries oneself in public, how bodies pass, how one tricks names, makes them inapplicable, slip over them and what types they might imply. 'I am very *different* from all these people and don't like attracting attention through flashy clothes' (John; 1991: 8, emphasis mine). At other times still, the name is confounded in a far more intricate game of hiding and seeking, of a zoning of secrecy and sharing. Here, this zoning, this game holds sway, and determine situations of same-sex desiring people, rather than the will to name or its absence. 'Because we must seek our orgasms in darkness, *secretly*, too often our sexual life never extends beyond our zippers' (Sandip; 1991: 12).

Still at other points of the personal narratives, same sex desire gets understood within the frames of sentiment and feelings that do not refer back these affects to an apparent inner causant, such as sexual orientation. Where the will *read them in* is absent, where desire is experienced without always attributing it to a specific fountainhead. 'I have often felt an attraction towards boys,' the 22 year old Chandrkant in Shahdara, Delhi tells ABVA members in the early 1990s, 'and have even experienced some sexual relations with them. But I don't think of myself as a homosexual. Actually, I don't agree with what the word means. Tell me, if I have an intense, psychic friendship with a girl, would I be called a heterosexual' (quoted in *Less Than Gay*; 1991: 11). 'If you mean by the word homosexual,' he continues, 'a certain sensibility (*bhaav*), then I would agree, I am one. I have many intense, intimate friendships with boys. I like being with them, touching them, sleeping next to them. But perhaps I still have a hang-up

about accepting myself as gay in sexual sense'. Chandrakant's unease with specific words is not mere linguistic quibbling. It is the disparity of conceptual logics, the tentative separability of idioms. He accepts the term, takes the name, but only on his own terms, with a different, personalized 'sense'.

Each of these instances are dissimilar. *Naming, feelings of difference, intimations of sameness, practices of habit, games of secrecy and sharing, experience of desire as such*, each of these are different modes of representation, they make for different situations. They realize same sex desire in disparate ways. They occur through different narratives and, more crucially, within the same ones. They cannot simply be overlapped with each other. Each posits a unique relation of the desire with the self who feels it, relations of truth, relations of irrelevance, relations of jocularly. 'In the cracks and cleavages in the spaces of this city,' Sheba Tejani talks of Bombay in her personal narrative for *Because*, 'my girlfriend and I had found the freedom to be bold, to be indifferent and absorbed. We had actually come to believe that *we were not extraordinary*, even as we existed on the margins of the heterosexual rule book. We held hands on Marine Drive, we kissed in the elevator and we laughed at prejudice' (Tejani: 2005: 273, emphasis mine). Simultaneously overplayed and irrelevant, simultaneously on the margin and in the thick of it all, the text does not zone in on one thing or one function of *sexuality*. The text of the personal narrative forfeits the classificatory sexual map as much as it adopts it, redraws it, interrupts and smudges it. The text becomes an unstable host to the various ways in which same-sex desire is moulded, is rendered into reference. It is a patchwork of these many ways, always doubling, always dynamic.



The word *lesbian* or *gay* is a sign. This sign functions in ways which are not uniform but tactical. Even within a single narrative, this sign modifies as it goes. It has no ultimate access to the narrating self. Its appearances in the narrative are disrupted by time and space – it is neither everywhere nor always. Often, it is interrupted and overtaken by more general repertoires of intimacy or affect, where its classificatory drive is muzzled. In his poem *Death and Fame*, the American poet Allen Ginsberg distills this point of overtake into a line: '*I forgot whether I was straight gay queer or funny, was myself, tender and affectionate to be kissed on the top of my head*' (Ginsberg: 1997, emphasis mine). The apotheosis of identity as its own forgetting, as its own irrelevance. The entire sprawl of the personal narrative, like the city map in the heads of de Certeau's urbanites, is uneven, it does not follow through any one sense of the word, it picks and drops terms, it digresses without notice. 'Linking acts and footsteps [of urban dwellers], opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearying-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied' (1984: 105). They are marked by a 'rich indetermination' which 'gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning' (*ibid.*). The concept of homosexuality as a separate thing, of the homosexual as a separate person, is offset by this poetic geography of personal narrative.

Words become clues, interpreted diversely, situationally, in each of their synchronic appearances. No one model, let alone of the homosexual, is ever fully realized in any given personal narrative. No given *text* of the personal narrative allows an even emphasis on any singular model of understanding same-sex desire. This section has argued for an intratextual

multiplicity within personal narratives, where one use of name is not isomorphous with another. It makes a case for close attentive readings of personal narratives. They are textual crucibles for mixing, for working out, for getting further bewildered with names. 'Language,' for Adam, who was made in the image of his arrogant God, was 'determined starting from the word and the privilege of naming' (Derrida; 2002: 120). This arrogance is unfounded, if words are followed through, if we travel where the word travels, if we go where it goes. For the same God, who gave the singular word, also scripted its impossibility. He dealt with the people of Shinar, who were building a tower to reach the heavens, to equal their maker. He 'confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech' (Gen. 11:9: King James Bible). The Tower of Babel meant the creation of language situations in time and space that were irreducible to each other and yet fervently coexisted. The naming of oneself has frequently been called upon as the distinctive, as the overwhelming act performed by self-identifying *gay* and *lesbian* people. However, it is in the tacticality of this naming that the animation lies. It is in the differential repeatability of names within the volume and duration of any given personal-narrative, that excitement lies, both political and intellectual.

#### **(v) Final Remarks**

*From all I did and all I said  
let no one try to find out who I was.  
An obstacle was there that changed the pattern  
of my actions and the manner of my life.  
An obstacle was often there  
to stop me when I'd begin to speak.  
From my most unnoticed actions,*

*my most veiled writing—  
from these alone will I be understood.  
But maybe it isn't worth so much concern,  
so much effort to discover who I really am.  
Later, in a more perfect society,  
someone else made just like me  
is certain to appear and act freely.* ('Hidden Things', Constantine P. Cavafy)

Activisms around *sexuality* have considered the narratives of the personal as worthy of much of its concern and effort. They have put together particular opportunities for voicing the personal, of writing all its unwritten parts. They have tried to remove all *obstacles* between narrators and speech. They have approached their writers and interviewees with repeated requests of transcribing their true feelings, their innermost secrets, their most difficult troubles and life-experiences. Much like Freud's eye would have caught the body-language of his patients, and his ear their slips of tongue, as evidences of the actual matter at hand, as proof of the *real* problem of his patients, queer activisms have noticed the *most unnoticed actions* and unveiled *the most veiled writing* in a bid to understand the living reality of those they fight for. In a bid to mobilize particular sexual identities as the provisional bases of their many fights.

The personal narratives however have played around with these sexual identities and with the concept of sexuality itself. A close reading of the textual sprawl of personal narratives reveals only a tactical ordering of different identity-based subject-positions. Reading each of these narratives offers different and often conflictual ways of referencing same-sex desire and those who experience it. Instead of pointing towards some defined and naturalized *sexuality*-based subject positions, all those recounted experiences of the narratives only end up foregrounding the processes by which these positions come to be adopted, how they come to be proudly

owned, flexibly changed, dropped altogether or made banal. The personal narratives evidence an implicit doubleness in the life of sexual identity. Even as the texts are triggered by and apparently made to cater to a few defining frameworks of activism, they also bring to activists a working knowledge about these frameworks, of their use and harms. They pitch a need for activism to constantly remodel itself. For activists to keep questioning their primary strategies, their pivotal concepts. Above all, the narratives detranscendentalize *sexuality*. They historicize it within a political and social everyday. They overturn and exceed Freud even as they cite him.

## Gay Writing and its Doubleness

### (i) The Mourning

When the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali (b. 1949) died in Amherst, Massachusetts in the winter of 2001, a distant friend of his organized a remembrance gathering on the 40th day after his death, the chehlom, the last day of mourning in the Islamic calendar.<sup>53</sup> Hoshang Merchant (b. 1947), lesser known as a poet than Ali but an abiding enthusiast of his verse, arranged this gathering in Hyderabad, a city where he has been teaching literature and writing poetry for years.<sup>54</sup> It was held at the Vidyanarayan School on the 14th of January in 2002. 'When she died,' Hoshang said referring to Shahid, 'I had a maha sabha ['a huge gathering'] here with my money' (personal interview with Merchant: July, 2010, sic). 'I called it a 'Celebration of Shahid Ali's Life and Poetry' and invited Munna, the sister-in-law of Shahid's sister Sameetah who is my neighbor from down the street here, as the chief guest' (ibid.). 'I served walnut cake in sherry, grape juice and Golconda wine as a nod towards Kashmir, towards the resurrection of Ali's spirit in heaven, and for his poetry' (ibid.). Hoshang wrote a poem for the occasion called 'Death of a Poet: 1.1.2002' as a gesture of remembrance and, I think, as a gesture which claimed a form of friendship with the deceased, as if to say that it

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<sup>53</sup> Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001) was a Kashmiri-American poet and taught in several creative writing departments across the United States. Ali was awarded Guggenheim and Ingram-Merrill Fellowships and a Pushcart Prize, and his collection *Rooms are Never Finished* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2001. The collected poems of Shahid Ali have appeared as *The Veiled Suite* brought out by Norton in 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Hoshang Merchant (b. 1947) is a poet and a professor of English based in Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, India. He has written more than thirteen books of poetry, most of them published with Writers Workshop in Calcutta. He is the editor of *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (Penguin Books: 1999).

were strong enough to personally organize a meeting of remembrance, to write a poem on the poet who had gone, and to effectively aver a posthumous closeness with him, a closeness that he had yearned for but never quite achieved when Shahid had been around.

‘On the way to the optician,’ Merchant wrote in his elegy, ‘I saw a Kashmiri shawl-vendor / trying the gate of a great house / I remembered Shahid Ali / I want to be a golden paisley / On the black shawl of Kashmir’ (personal copy, 2002). The poem was a tribute to Shahid both in its form and its occasion of composition. It used some of Shahid’s favorite images, the visceral fabrics of Kashmir and its designs, the paisleys, and it invoked Shahid’s favorite topography, that of the snow clad mountains of the Kashmir valley - ‘mountains of dry ice,’ Hoshang wrote, ‘ice like glass’ (ibid.). During the gathering Hoshang read Shahid’s poem ‘The country without a post-office,’ ‘sobbed rather than read it,’ he told me, along with his own requiem for Shahid. The Hyderabad based Urdu poet Jameela Nishaat (b. 1955), a friend of Hoshang, read her poem for Shahid, the one which she had especially written for this chehlom along with some of Hoshang’s students reading Ali’s popular poems like ‘The Dacca Gauzes’ and ‘Dream of Glass Bangles’. ‘I repeated the event for Ismat Mehdi’s ‘Poetry Society’, the Hyderabad chapter of the London based association,’ Hoshang recounted, ‘[t]here was not a dry eye in the audience on both occasions’ (Merchant: ibid.). This was the most intimate experience Hoshang had had with Shahid Ali, an intimacy that could not be disputed in Shahid’s death, in the unavailability of his response.

## **(ii) Hoshang/Shahid, Or, What is Gay Writing?**

Around five years before he died, in mid-1996, Agha Shahid Ali had refused to be a part of a collection of writings that Hoshang was putting together as an editor. It was ultimately to be published in the year 1999 as *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India*, with a strong marketing pitch of being 'India's first gay anthology' (Merchant; 1999: x).<sup>55</sup> 'I am humbled,' Hoshang had written in the July of that year, 'to have been entrusted with defining the historic moment for India's homosexuals through their literature, old and new, heroic or pedestrian, lovely and lovelorn or rough and ironic' (ibid. xxv).

Hoshang told me that it was not easy at all to put together that collection. Repeatedly he said that 'there were slim-pickings,' 'I picked up anyone and put them in,' 'I was a despo lesbo' (prsnl interview). Shahid's refusal had 'crushed' him (ibid.). He tried to persuade Shahid by continuing the correspondence between Amherst and New York City, where Shahid was based in the late 1990s, and Hyderabad, where he himself lived, but to no avail. The collection went into print without Shahid.

Hoshang remembers Shahid's refusal as a snub, a 'perfidy,' and 'perfidies' he told me, campily, 'are never forgiven even if they can be understood' (ibid.). The introduction to *Yaraana* carried Hoshang's final, hostile dart – '[t]he problem with India's gay literary elite is that most of them (here I'm talking of Indian writers in English) are still in the closet. Some do not want to be identified as gay...' (Merchant: ibid. xvi). 'Were you referring to Shahid in particular when you wrote that?' I had asked him, to which he had replied with an unequivocal 'yes' (prsnl

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<sup>55</sup> *Yaraana* is the Urdu and Hindi word for friendship in general, and male friendship in particular. The *yaar* is the male friend.

interview). 'I understood his reasons only later, earlier I thought he was just being mean...I was just a confused fairy then' (*ibid.*).

This chapter uses the moment of Shahid's refusal to Hoshang as an entry point to ask and answer some crucial questions about the concept of 'gay writing'. It would try to sieve out its various dimensions: that of 'gay writing' (or 'lesbian writing') as a publishing phenomenon, as a political imperative for 'liberation' and 'rights', as a machine of expression for 'certain' people and 'certain' bodies, that is, as an exceptionalist endeavour, as a perceived foil for 'great writing', and as a literary style and form.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 'Gay writing', like its other identity-driven counterparts 'women's writing' and 'black writing', has often been seen as a foil of 'great writing'. Although it is commonly realized that the *raison d'être* of 'gay' writing is not whether it is 'good' or 'bad' but that it has a temporary and urgent political function to serve, or a 'gay market' to cater to, still these categories have often been held in opposition to each other. Hoshang wrote in an essay on Shahid, one might contend slightly underestimating Shahid's oeuvre, that '[c]ritics say [that the Italian Pier Paolo] Pasolini's transcendence is not to be found in Ali or in my poetry. In other words, we're stuck with the boys' whereas Pasolini has gone on to become the 'epic poet of the slums of post-World War II Rome' (2007). In my interview, Hoshang mentioned this conceit of 'transcendence' (from 'gay' to 'great') several times. He, however, was conflicted whether this transcendence comes in the form of 'hiding' the experiences, one's own or the characters', of love for the same sex, or in 'going beyond the shame of talking about oneself and one's characters' in the terms of those experiences' (*ibid.*). Here he likened 'gay', 'women' or 'black' as the 'shoe which is pinching you' and something you need to pacify before you get onto the calmer, greater writing. Hoshang recounted Hopkins, Melville, Dickinson, Pasolini and Shakespeare, among others, as writers who had made this so called transcendent leap in their writings. He excluded himself from the list. Though he maintained that there is still a need for 'gay' collections for several reasons, including 'to dispel homophobia with knowledge, openness and achievement, to say we're not a lunatic fringe, we're right there in the centre of it all', he wrote, while introducing his own 'gay anthology' against the tendency in the 'new gay academic mafia', which he undeniably shares, to 'fit all literature into a form of their own special pleading' (1999: xvii). He suggested instead that 'there is a literature above one's own special pleading, the sonnets of Shakespeare, for example, being products of genius rather than homosexual mania' (*ibid.*). Hoshang, as can be seen, is in the legacy of the perceived split between the agendas of 'gay writing' and 'great writing'. Vikram Seth has poeticized this split between 'gay' and 'great' famously in his limerick - 'Some men like Jack and some like Jill / I'm glad I like them both but still / I wonder if this freewheeling



### **(iii) Why Only Gay Folk can write Gay, Or, The Exceptionalist Art of Gay Writing**

In the year 1996 when Hoshang started asking around for contributions for his forthcoming collection, he told potential contributors that 'I'm writing a gay anthology and you must come out as gay' (ibid.). With the scope of this demand, and the way it was framed, Shahid's refusal to be included was straightforwardly read as a refusal to 'come out'; '[t]hat crazy pussy, she wasn't ready to come out...he wanted to be the poet laureate of a Taliban state called 'Azad Kashmir,' Hoshang said, smiling, exaggeratedly, with a studied superficiality with Kashmir's history, but with the sense of being wronged intact.

In an interview Hoshang had given to the writer R. Raj Rao, he talked at length and with some sourness about Shahid's refusal. 'Then there were living gays,' he said, 'bright, luminaries, who refused to state publicly in India that they were gay, while living deliciously gay lives in the West. As you can see, the first enemy is always within. Now that Aga Shahid Ali,' he continued, 'is

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/ Really is an enlightened thing, / Or is its greater scope a sign / Of deviance from some party line? / In the strict ranks of Gay and Straight / What is my status: Stray? Or Great?' Manchester based writer and reviewer Jonathan Statham, told me in an email conversation, that this legacy of the split is based on two assumptions: one, that '...that great writing transcends all categories, that it is somehow above any label you might put on it', as if 'Moby Dick' is not a 'sea novel', an 'adventure novel', an 'American national allegory', a 'quest narrative' all of these, and (b) that we always fail to see categories as anything other than limitations, instead of which Jonathan suggested, 'to be gay, as either writing or a person, is not to have a limit, it is to have a dimension. It is, after all, necessary to be something (gay, straight, bi, whatever), indeed to be many things [at many times], and not just an abstract anything. Gay writing is writing that has a gay dimension (which does not prevent it having others)' (2010). American playwright Tony Kushner's 'Angels in America', one could say, is an 'AIDS drama', a 'magic realist play', a 'gay play', a 'commentary on religion', an 'empathetic indictment of contemporary American society', a 'gay fantasia on national themes', a 'cerebral piece' et. al..

dead, a person whose poetry I thought as if he were Shakespeare, I can briefly sketch for you the heart-breaking pleading correspondence I had with a totally evasive man – no,’ he says, thinking about several possible reasons for Shahid’s refusal but finally zoning on his desired role as a ‘national poet’ of a free Kashmir as decisive, ‘it was not the fear of losing an inheritance, nor a fear of an *outing*, not the fear of paining one’s devout parents, nor incriminating one’s friends...No, it was something quite else...Ali was already courting the Indian nation’s displeasure once [vis-à-vis Kashmir]. And he did not want to do it twice over – also *as a gay*’ (quoted in R. Raj Rao; 2009: 7, emphasis mine).<sup>57</sup>

‘It was one of Shahid’s contradictions,’ Shahid’s lifelong close friend Saleem Kidwai told me, in a bookshop in central Lucknow, in a mellower tone, and with a sense of understanding that comes with years of friendship and love, ‘not giving us permission to publish anything in *Same Sex Love* while he was being published in a gay anthology in America’ (prsnl interview with Saleem Kidwai: July, 2010). Saleem was a contemporary of Shahid in Delhi University in the late 60s and early 70s, where he studied History at St. Stephens College and Shahid studied and then taught English at Hindu College, across the road from Saleem.

Saleem, along with another of his Delhi University friend Ruth Vanita, was to be the editor of *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000) that was published a year after *Yaraana* and was much bigger in its scope and intention, a more enduring collection, it

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<sup>57</sup> In his obituary for his friend Shahid Ali, the author Amitav Ghosh retells an episode when he talked with Shahid about his possible role as a national poet for Kashmir: ‘I once remarked to Shahid,’ he writes, ‘that he was the closest that Kashmir had to a national poet. He shot back: “A national poet, maybe. But not a nationalist poet; please not that.” If anything, Kashmir’s current plight,’ Ghosh continued, ‘represented for him the failure of the emancipatory promise of nationhood and the extinction of the pluralistic ideal that had been so dear to intellectuals of his [Shahid’s] father’s generation’ (Ghosh; 2002: 14).

would seem, including material about same-sex desire from ancient and medieval India and from its Sanskrit and the Perso-Urdu traditions. For its last section on the 'Modern Indian Materials,' which included works of writers like Rajendra Yadav and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, Vikram Seth and Hoshang Merchant, Saleem had corresponded with his old friend Shahid and asked for his poetry. But Shahid was being difficult, as only friends can be.

Saleem remembers asking him – 'why have you not been answering my letters, why are you not giving me permission' (ibid.). Shahid had replied with how he 'could not stand Hoshang' who had been 'pestering him' and 'wanted something, anything' for his volume (ibid.). 'Are you equating me with Hoshang,' Saleem had asked, 'no no,' Shahid had replied, Saleem remembers in his words, 'I don't want to be outed in India, for the sake of my father...Kashmir is another world...because it will hurt his image.'

Shahid's father was Agha Ashraf Ali, in his 80s now, who was the Jammu and Kashmir Inspector of Schools, 'a teacher of teachers' (Ashraf Ali, quoted in Lepaska) in his own words, in the 1950s and the Director of Education for all of Jammu and Kashmir by 1971. Taught when he was twenty by Dr. Zakir Hussain, the future president of independent India, influenced by the Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdullah's politics when he was older and educated in England and seduced by the philosophy of Martin Buber, Ashraf Ali belonged to one of the more important political families in Kashmir with a wide net of influence in its education and bureaucracy. 'It's still such a feudal system there,' Shahid had once told his friend and writer Amitav Ghosh, talking about Kashmir where he had wanted to go to die in his last days of illness on the East Coast, 'and there will be so much support—and my father is there too' (quoted in Ghosh; 2002: 15). It was this net that Shahid did not want to overtly disturb, the net held in place by the

figure of his father and his friends, by writing in books about 'same-sex love' or of 'gay writing', things which his father's world did not realize in the same way, or in the same terms.

It was a step that looked like a 'fear of a witch-hunt' to the acquaintance and fellow poet, Hoshang (1999: xvi), like an irreducible 'contradiction' to the friend, Saleem (2010 *ibid.*) and like a wish for preserving one of his many worlds, to Shahid himself ('I don't want to...').<sup>58</sup> The step was undoubtedly based on the idea, a strong and not unusual assumption that is implicit in the very origin and the development of the genre of 'gay writing', that to write for its anthologies is to evidently identify oneself as 'gay', an assumption that Shahid reasonably shared with Hoshang, for all their differences. That to be included in such a collection is also to be marked. Hoshang's call to come write to his contributors was also, by his own admission, a call to come out. Saleem's *Same-Sex Love*, unattached as it was to any direct identifying marker unlike *Yaraana* which had 'gay' on its cover, was a better bet in this respect. It included, in its 'modern' section, the Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai and the Hindi writer Rajendra Yadav, writers who have been known to produce situations of same-sex desire in their stories, but not majorly in their biographies. But Shahid had desisted, it seems, even from the very proximity of association and the distinct possibility of that news reaching his father's Kashmiri circles. With Hoshang, the game had always been simpler, hence the refusal

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<sup>58</sup> In the teeth of Shahid's continuing refusal to be in his volume, Hoshang had sent him a long letter that listed, he told me, 'eight possible reasons according to me why the queen refused to be in my book' (prsnl interview, 2010). These reasons, some more serious than others, included, Hoshang recalls, 'security of job, the sanctity his father's circles, his inheritance, his fame as a poet, his wanting to remain a mainstream American poet and not a marginalized one, a future marriage, his image in Kashmir etc..' (*ibid.*) Shahid wrote back a letter saying, Hoshang recounts, 'it's none of these, I'll tell you when I'm in Hyderabad...He never came, he was mad, such illusions of grandeur but I have known in my time Palestinian queens in Germany who wouldn't say it because they would lose their scholarship' (*ibid.*).

had been blunter; '[w]hat qualifies one to write for a gay anthology,' I had asked Hoshang, during the two day interview at his house in Hyderabad. His immediate answer was 'you need to be a gay person writing about gay experiences.' (prsnl interview: *ibid.*)

Who can write 'lesbian writing' or 'gay writing'? With whom lies the wherewithal of writing a 'lesbian story'? Who cannot write a 'gay poem'? These questions are as old as those categories themselves and have been answered, mostly, without much uncertainty. When we call a piece of writing a 'lesbian story', what is the final clincher for us in making that call - is it the content and themes of that story, its form and language, the situations and relationships that come about within them, is it the sexuality as experienced by the specific body of the story writer, or some combination of these? Where does the buck finally stop in deciding whether a story qualifies or not as a 'gay story'? What is the factor that matters in making this decision or that which matters the most?

It seems that 'lesbian writing' (or 'gay writing') has sourced itself so strongly from the particularised body of the writer that any other way of creating 'lesbian writing' seemed for long quite impossible. Only certain people, only certain kinds of bodies could write that story. It was a one to one connection between the kind of writer and the kind of writing. 'If you're straight,' Hoshang told me, 'and you write about gay experience, that is mere titillation,' not quite writing in his scheme of things, or not yet (*ibid.*). 'Your experience in London with women,' he told me, 'does not make you bisexual, it's mere titillation' (*ibid.*). 'Lesbian writing' or 'gay writing' is mostly conceived as copyrighted onto lesbian and gay bodies; it is their sole preserve, possible only within them. This copyright condition shares its moment of incipience with that form of writing itself.

In the late 1920s, when Radclyffe Hall (b. 1880) was thinking about writing *The Well of Loneliness* (pub. 1928), nowadays usually recalled as a 'lesbian classic', she had gone to her life-long friend and lover Lady Una Troubridge to talk about what she was going to do, and what her fears and excitements were at that moment. Una had later recorded their conversation in her diary:

'...It was after the success of Adam's Breed that John came to me one day with unusual gravity and asked for my decision in a serious matter: she had long wanted to write a book on sexual inversion, a novel that would be accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises...It was her absolute conviction that such a book could only be written by a sexual invert, who alone could be qualified by personal knowledge and experience to speak on behalf of a misunderstood and misjudged minority.' (Troubridge, quoted in Knopp; 1992: 114, emphasis mine)

The exceptionalism of 'lesbian writing', the idea that only some unique people can write it, has for long had a political valence. It was conceived as a project to be taken up, to compensate for all the writing that 'others' have done for 'us', all the representing that 'they' have gone on doing, where 'we' have been ridiculed, misjudged and caricatured. It was implicit that others had either a lack of will or certainly a lack of imagination to even comprehend the experience of living out as a 'lesbian' and then to put it into a fuller sort of writing. '[P]ersonal knowledge and experience,' Hall mentioned to Una, are the hallmarks that qualify one to write such stories. But, more importantly, we should ask, where is this 'personal knowledge and experience' grafted? Is it easy for this knowledge and experience to be capable in different kinds of people? What is the place that holds this knowledge and experience and works it out? '[O]nly' the body of the 'sexual invert' (ibid.). Lesbian writing is seen always as emerging from a signature body, a body that the late nineteenth century sexologists, with their extensive 'technical treatises', had given their hearts and minds to popularize, to make it the fundamental way of seeing people. Hall's

heroine in the novel, Stephen Gordon, literally discovered herself in one of those treatises, the works of the Austro-German sexologist and psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (d. 1902).

Around the late 1990s, when Ashwini Sukhthankar, in her early twenties, was putting together the 'first' collection of 'lesbian writing from India' called *Facing the Mirror*, commissioned by the same publisher as *Yaraana* and published in the same year, she had to get some pieces translated into English from the regional Indian languages. She arranged for a specific team to do this job. 'Some pieces were translated...by other lesbian- and bisexual-identified women, of course: a translator has to be wholly faithful to her author's tongue, the nuance and the music of it, and we could not expect such fidelity from someone with a different erotic awareness' (Sukhthankar; 1999: xxi; emphasis mine). She who does not identify as 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' is incapable of the translator's fidelity, of course.

Where does the confidence of Ashwini's 'of course' emerge? What hedges in 'lesbian' emotion, its nuance and music, and makes it untranslatable by others? What is the premise of this distrust, this fundamental lack of expectation and the skepticism for the translator of 'a different erotic awareness'? The anthologizing of 'lesbian writing' changes, to an extent, the very terms whereby the translators are chosen, now not wholly depending on their familiarity with the two languages involved, or here, even with the subject of eroticism, but another sort of familiarity, one that is routed through the translator's particular body, through a specific kind of 'erotic awareness'. The terms of inclusion for the translator are the terms of her body.

This is unsurprising. Sukhthankar, after all, a student of comparative literature at Harvard, figures in a dense lineage of feminist, lesbian theorists, editors and writers who have begun their search for 'lesbian writing' with the body of the writer, and come only later, to the shape,

quality and the content of that writing. They have placed writing in the body; '[w]rite your self, Your body must be heard' (Cixous; 1976: 880). They have seen and struggled to establish an essential and implicit connection between the two, where the body furnishes or yields the writing, is inextricable from the content. "[W]riting", Sukhthankar asserts, in the line before she talks about the translation, 'signifies the gritty imperfect media through which the body, with its yearning and its suffering, spoke out; the process through which our lives, put into the tangibility of words, could be made public' (Sukhthankar *ibid.*, emphasis mine). The first point of departure, for 'lesbian writing', its original fountainhead is the very tangible body of the writer. Without it, Sukhthankar seems to say, the writing is not 'wholly faithful', what Hoshang, in cruder terms, had called 'titillation'. Without it, it seems to be a lesser form of writing, pleasurable yes but not valid enough. Shahid had refused, it is probable, because, for any one to see his works in a 'gay anthology', especially for his father's circles in Kashmir, would make them not only parse his writing, but more crucially, automatically parse his body itself, make decisions on its behalf, carry over the interpretations from their reading. That's what 'gay writing' does to the body of the writer by locating it as its final source and inspiration, by making the body the source of all literary imagination and the final grail of all interpretation. The very act of writing it is an exercise in exceptionalism, it is saying something unique about your own body, about your own 'erotic awareness'.

Identity based struggles in the 1960s and 70s in Europe and the United States have revolved around the body and made it the exceptional factor in representation, and the main qualifier of who can do the critical task of representing at hand. The specific forms that have done this writing and showing, for women, blacks and lesbians and gay men, have always zoned in on the



body - the portrait in photography, the talking-heads in documentaries and the personal narratives in writing. The feminist manifestos that came out in the 1970s and called loudly for launching the genre of 'women's writing' in good earnest located women's bodies, in particular, as their unequivocal source and trigger. The bodies have to be mined for writing, so certain bodies become capable of that writing, and others implicitly do not. It was not framed mainly as a question of political imagination but instead as that of bodily experience - body as experiencing desire, body as experiencing assault. Not on what you think but instead on what you are, viscerally, bodily. In fact the body was seen as the basic marker of experience. French feminist activist and writer Helene Cixous' watershed essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' appeared bang in the centre of the 1970s in the journal *Signs* and asked the women 'to write. An act which would not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being...it will give her back her goods,' she claimed, 'her pleasures, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal' (Cixous: *ibid.*). All of Cixous's metaphors recruit the body as the wellspring of writing. To make 'her shattering entry into history' the woman must lay bare, let her flesh speak true, write in the 'white ink' of her 'good mother's milk' (*ibid.* 880-1). The visceral metaphors condense into what seems like a common denominator of *écriture féminine*: 'a woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor - once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it...' (*ibid.* 885).

In the same decade as Cixous's essay, the major political conceit, the main strategy that dominated the 1970s Gay Liberation in Europe and the United States was something that depended on the complete visibility of the individual body: coming out. One of its major and

first slogans directly choreographed the movement of this body: 'Out of the closets! Onto the streets!' 'The name of the Italian gay liberation movement, Fuori, means Out; in its newspaper it declared: 'What are we asking of you? To come out!' (Richmond and Noguera 1973: 154)...Carl Whitman's 'Gay Manifesto', first published in the San Francisco Free Press at the end of 1969, begins its list of 'imperatives of gay liberation' with 'Free ourselves; come out everywhere' (1972: 341)' (Dyer; 2003: 232). Hoshang Merchant was the inheritor of this atmosphere of the 1970s post-Stonewall America. During this decade he finished his masters at Occidental College in Los Angeles and then went on to study for his PhD on Anais Nin at the University of Purdue in West Lafayette, Indiana. His days at Purdue were the early days of the post-Stonewall coming out form of politics, a form that was held to be urgent, very exciting and politically useful. Hoshang cites this moment usually in his introductions at panels, on book covers and in poetry meetings: '[h]e helped establish the Gay Liberation at Purdue'. His book was the logical culmination of this form of politics that he had soaked up in his years in the States and Europe, a form of politics that sees 'gay writing' as the business only of 'gay bodies' who automatically come out when they publish in 'gay anthologies'. During our conversations over two days about 'gay writing', the only book that Hoshang ever picked up to quote to me, out of the clumsy pile of books in his living room, was the one edited by David Bergman. It was called 'The Violet Quill Reader: The Emergence of Gay Writing After Stonewall' (pub. 1994).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The American magazine *Publishers Weekly* described Bergman's book in the following words (why this would influence Hoshang's ideas about 'gay writing' becomes amply clear): 'In 1980 and 1981, seven prominent gay authors--Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, Christopher Cox, Michael Grumley, Robert Ferro, Felice Picano and George Whitmore--met to discuss and read their writings. Known informally as the Violet Quill Club, they shared a desire to write works that reflected their gay experiences, works aimed specifically at gay readers who would not

#### **(iv) Why Only Gay People Don't Write Gay: The Anti-Exceptionalist Art of Gay Writing**

Long conversations are capable of yielding contradictions, of revealing a form of doubleness that turns the thing on itself and says its opposite in the same breath. Such conversations, that last longer than the purpose of getting a sound byte for a broadcast or a good quote for an essay, often question their own premise as they go along, acknowledge that there are more than one ways in which a particular thing works, that there are different models at hand, of functioning, interpreting and of remembering, and they leave you with a distinct sense that all these models are acting together, without much problem other than those that are the interpreter's.

My conversation with Hoshang lasted over three days. It took place mainly in his living room at his seventh floor one BHK in an apartment building called 'Garden Towers' in the Masab Tank

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challenge their point of view. Collectively, the notoriety and writings of the Violet Quill changed the course of gay literature, replacing the longstanding image of the doomed or martyred homosexual with one of active protagonists speaking, as Bergman (*Gaiety Transfigured*) puts it, the "language gay men use among themselves"...this anthology consists of...White's letter to friends about his participation in the Stonewall Riots...several excerpts from novels, many of them written during the heady disco era of the 1970s and depicting gay life in Manhattan and Fire Island...subsequent selections reveal not only the uneven talents within the group but also the maturation of some of its writers...life histories can be pieced together from Bergman's notes to each selection and from one of the anthology's chief delights, extracts from the unpublished journals of Picano and Grumley, and from correspondence between Ferro and Holleran. Four members of the Violet Quill have been lost to AIDS and a fifth is reported ill; in the later selections, the writers grapple with the disease in fiction and nonfiction, as both plotlines and personal lives become rewritten. The most powerful moment of the anthology occurs, in fact, when, following Ferro's death, Holleran examines his more than 20 years of friendship with that writer. Bergman notes that "the theme of friendship unites all the fiction of the Violet Quill . . . a theme that, more than any other, separates gay fiction from straight fiction"; as Holleran says, "It really was a brotherhood."

area in Hyderabad. The living room itself was quite open and spare, with a settee, a sitting space put together with a dari and some pillows, and shelves and piles of books in two corners. The house was airy and had signs of being lived in for long. Whereas I mostly sat on the carpet or on the small moda (cane stool) in the living room, Hoshang alternated between being sprawled on the settee in his thin lungi, or running in and out of the small kitchen to get me something to eat, while he loudly insisted that I eat something or at least have apple or orange juice every two hours, or sometimes getting me different kinds of Hoshang memorabilia - snippets from his six decade life in three continents - from his bedroom which I could see from where I sat. All the doors of the living room, including the one which opened onto the shared floor area outside and the one onto the balcony were in the permanent state of openness, so we could hear the sounds of the neighbours when they got out, or even see them, and the sounds of city pouring in from the seventh floor living room balcony from where you could see, Hoshang pointed them out, the Char Minar ('Mosque of the Four Minarets', built 1591) and the Mecca Masjid and from the bedroom balcony, the staccato heights of the medieval Golconda Fort itself. Hoshang's poetry collection that came out in the year 1992 was called 'Hotel Golkonda', one of his favorite haunts in Hyderabad.

When we were not in his house, he was showing me the city, like its patron saint, taking me to the Friday night dargah (Sufi shrine) music gatherings, introducing me to the head priest of the dargah who was also an antique collector, in a high-kitsch living room with more than ten chandeliers, meeting my friends from the HCU where he taught, feeding me at different old city restaurants, refusing to let me pay, and taking an auto ride around the fort while it rained heavily. All this while, the conversation was on, about him, about Shahid, about his and my sex

life and about Hyderabad. In the titular poem in 'Hotel Golkonda', Hoshang writes 'I was reprimanded always for talking too much' (Merchant; 1992). Hoshang was a friend, a flirt and a grandfather, seamlessly, and I could see that he enjoyed the former roles, performed them to an excess, brashly, in high camp with its staple, unpredictable moments of searing honesty, but sometimes, not infrequently, resigned to the hexagenarian sobriety of the latter. These changes of attitudes, that are implicit in the length of the conversations, also inflected his idea of 'gay writing' and the use or the uselessness of the category of the 'gay writer' and of the very act of anthologizing.

One of the first stories to become progressively more layered was the story of how the anthology was put together. Hoshang knew that there was a wide assortment of potential contributors for his volume if he only threw his net wide enough. This meant having a very flexible working idea of what goes into a 'gay anthology' rather than the more stingy gay-writer-writing-about-gay-experiences formula that Hoshang had advanced to me more than once.

When Hoshang had gotten in touch with the Urdu/Punjabi writer Gyansingh Shatir (b. 1935) he changed his call, altered it considerably to not put him off. 'I did not tell them gay-shay,' Hoshang said with a distinct sense of cunning, 'I told them dosti ['friendship'], uske baare mein hai ['it is about that']' and then 'once they gave their consent, phir usko chakka banaya ['then I made him a eunuch'] [claps his hands]' (prsnl interview ibid.). Shatir's six-page story 'Never take candy from a stranger!' had little to do, if at all, with friendship. It is written in the autobiographical mode and is about the pleasurable experiences of a fair young boy in a Punjab village whose beauty, classically enough, is his boon and his bane, leading to a brutal climactic

episode of assault by an older man. The story spins around on the saying in Shatir's village: 'God must not bless anyone with fair colour / It is like inviting the enmity of the whole town.' (Shatir; 1999: 152) and ends with a numbed protagonist who is unable to take gifts from 'anybody', even his 'dear friends' (ibid. 157).

Hoshang knew he was playing with categories when he was editing this collection, enjoying outwitting the shatirs in the business (Urdu 'shatir' literally means 'chess-player' but generally implies 'the cunning one') who would fall for one kind of frame, one kind of call for contributions but not for another. Different writers for this one 'gay anthology' posed different exigent situations. The premise of the call sent to Shahid underwent a transformation by the time it was extended to Shatir, from being based heavily on the sexual identity of the writer, on experience ratified by his body, it came to be based mainly on the content of 'friendship' that the writer writes about. The label 'gay' itself metamorphosed into a more flippant version in Hoshang's head - gay-shay, using a common Hindi linguistic maneuver whereby words are informalized, made casual by being accompanied by their assonants (chai-shai, plan-shlan). Anthologizing the collection was an exercise in such fundamental revisions of what it meant to write 'gay' and what it meant to use or discard this cachet of the 'gay writer'.

Even the iconic manifestoes of identity-based writing are not immune to such basic revisions of what it means to be 'woman', 'gay', 'dalit' or 'black'. Helene Cixous, who had found all writing by women as rooted in their bodies ('[w]omen must write through their bodies'), lets her essay surprise the readers by betraying this logic quite often enough to be considered a consistent parallel track in the work (Cixous; ibid: 886). This happens when she first faces the problem as to '[w]hich works, then, might be called feminine' (878) head on. Whereas she defers the

question, as to 'what is pervasively feminine' in these texts, a question that she picks up later but only skittishly, she see an immense poverty of real 'feminine' writing in her home country France. '[T]he only inscriptions of femininity that I have seen,' she says, 'are by Colette, Marguerite Duras [the ellipsis is Cixous's]...and Jean Genet' (879).<sup>60</sup> There is an odd-man-out in Cixous' list, a man who is incapable of living out of a woman's body but is nevertheless capable of making a 'feminine' text.

How is this possible? This is the precise doubleness of 'women's writing' that is shot through Cixous's essay and that expands its catchment area of writers to beyond those who are female bodied. Here Cixous sees femininity, not as residing in one's body, but instead in one's politics. This is a major revision of criterion of who gets into the fold. A 'feminine' text is not a text written by women. In fact Cixous 'deducts' from her list that 'species of female writers' which is an 'immense majority' and 'whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing' (878). 'Feminine' or 'masculine' here are not a body thing, they are placeholders for political viewpoints. The 'feminine' text is a text that 'cannot fail to be more than subversive', it is an essay that see 'more closely the inanity of [all] "propriety"' and it is in the hands of those writers, female or male or otherwise, 'who would go to any lengths to slip something at odds with tradition' (888, 879). The 'masculine' text, on the other hand, is tradition-bound and status-quo esque. In this scheme of things, the 'feminine' text skirts the route of the writer's body and finally comes to sit in the writer's worldview. The condition of women's writing, being

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<sup>60</sup> Jean Genet (1910-86) was a major French novelist, playwright, poet, film-maker and political activist. His major works include the novels *Querelle of Brest*, *The Thief's Journal*, and *Our Lady of the Flowers*, and the plays *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, *The Maids* and *The Screens*. His reputation as a petty thief, gotten early in life, was to abide through his writing career.

‘from and toward women’, offered by Cixous herself, is kept at bay to elaborate another simultaneous way of seeing and scripting ‘women’s writing’ (881). When Cixous tries to persuade her readers that the mythical ‘dark continent’ of ‘womanhood’ is actually not that dark or impervious at all, she tells them of a short Dantesque trip she took - ‘...the continent is not impenetrably dark. I’ve been there often. I was overjoyed one day to run into Jean Genet. It was in Pompes funebres. He had come there led by his Jean. There are some men (all too few) who aren’t afraid of femininity’ (885).

When, in December, 1998 in Bombay, Ashwini Sukthankar started taking stock of all the contributions that she had received for her collection on ‘lesbian writing in India’, she paused before she went ahead and made the political choice of clubbing them all together as ‘lesbian writing’. This moment of pause became the introduction to her edited collection published later next year by Penguin India. ‘We are all lesbians,’ Ashwini claimed for each of her contributors, ‘...but what that means is not necessarily obvious’ (1999: xxvii).

Here the word slipped out of her editorial control, and out of her political strategy, and became specific for each instance of contribution to the book. ‘[F]or some,’ she relented, ‘it signifies purely the erotic’, for some ‘lesbianism is in part a deliberate stance adopted in opposition to patriarchy’, for some it ‘indicates a totality of women-centered lives, which we lead for and with each other’, for some, ‘lesbian’ is taken up and dropped casually, some grow into and some out of it, whereas some ‘just want to be’ it, rather than ‘attend conferences about it’ (xxvii-xxix). Some refused to identify themselves as ‘lesbian’ preferring home-grown labels like ‘samyonik’ (Sanskrit ‘sam’ is ‘union’, ‘yoni’ is ‘vagina’) or saheli (‘female friend’). Others had no truck with the term at all.



This had become amply clear to Hoshang when he had set about finding a “gay poem” (single quotations in original) in the oeuvre of the Allahabad Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896-1982) (Merhcant: 208). Gorakhpuri, which was the poetic alias of Raghupati Sahay, was a prominent Urdu poet and a teacher of Romantic poetry at the Department of English at the Allahabad University. He was reportedly the Prime-Minister-to-be Jawaharlal Nehru’s teacher during his university education in Allahabad.

In the late eighties when the anthropologist Lawrence Cohen spent some of his time in Varanasi and stayed in hostel rooms at the Banaras Hindu University, he got into several discussions about the then recently deceased Firaq with the M.A. students there. ‘Firaq,’ he noted, ‘was a complex figure of libertinage who, in these conversations, sometimes called to mind sexual license with women even while standing as the classic figure of the exultant and unrepentant lover of young men’ (2002: 151).

On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1949, in writing a letter to his life-long friend and inconsistent beloved Saghar Nizami (1905-1983), the Urdu poet Josh Malihabadi (1896-1982), who self-avowedly fell in love 18 times, twice with men, declared that he had ‘written a thousand times that I am dying to see you...Serious matters over, let’s indulge in some vulgarity’ (quoted in Kidwai; 2000: 279). He begins by wondering whether a female prostitute who would mount a man would be called a *gandu* (bugger), then refers to a Rampur poet Aslam Khan who ‘has a young poet staying with him. He has sent me an article in his praise for publication. The poor dove takes pains so that the crow gets to eat the eggs!’ (*ibid.*). It is in the middle of this playful mood, right after the reference to Khan’s plan to get into the young poet’s bed, that Josh refers to his friend Firaq Gorakhpuri of Allahabad – ‘Firaqwa is having a great time these days, and me, I’m starving’

(*ibid.*). He follows that quickly with 'I thought of you last night and an earthquake erupted in the crotch of my trousers' (*ibid.*).

In introducing Sahay, Merchant was building on this legend of Firaq and wrote that 'it was an open secret that Firaq was a homosexual' (*ibid.*). He added though '[i]t was also a well-known fact that he never wrote a gay line' (*ibid.*). Here again, the fundamental criteria of what is 'gay writing' and who can write it perform some acrobatics. A 'gay line' does not automatically flow out of 'a homosexual'. All the 'personal knowledge and experience' (Radclyffe Hall's words) that comes with 'being a homosexual' cannot be simply read back from the writings. Here, whereas Hoshang sees 'homosexual' to be a bodily condition, he does not see a 'gay line' as implicit in this condition, the latter comes, rather, with adopting a particular political viewpoint which Firaq never shared with Hoshang - that of sexual identity and coming-out. Finally, with slim pickings to be made among the pool of 'gay' writers, Hoshang gave up his search of the 'gay poem' and translated one of Firaq's poems, from the literary periodical *Sabras*, as 'Public Meeting and Parting as Private Acts', that is reminiscent both of the canonical Urdu love of male beauty and Hoshang's more contemporary ideas about male cruising in parks -

'Look at your face in the mirror, friend  
After our reunion it shines twice as bright  
I am besotted with the scent of your words  
His each word brings the scent of his lips  
This isn't a public meeting since  
My eyes are raised only to you  
This coloured cloth hides a secret joy  
There's current playing under the shroud of grass  
Loving grudgingly is no love, friend  
Go! Now you have no sorrow for me  
Nevertheless my life is spent  
Either remembering or forgetting you  
Your tearful shadow is the sorrow of the age  
Before my sight plays this shadow eternally' (quoted in Merchant; 1999: 1)

#### **(v) Literary Fame and 'Gay' Writing as a Marketing Gamble**

'One, for India's first gay anthology, there were slim pickings...So I had to include stories by heterosexual men and women dealing with fictionalized or real gay characters. I also included a story satirizing heterosexuality from the gay perspective. But Penguin dropped it. About Makarand's [Paranjpe] *The Narrator*, a rival company published it and we could not afford the copyright royalties. There were other Penguin books, but the author was either Sri Lankan or had foreign publishers, which meant paying copyright fees in dollars and pounds. There were Indian gay authors published by Penguin and that would be a duplication of effort. By which I mean, who would read the entire novel if they get all the salacious bits in *Yaraana* for Rs 200? *These are commercial considerations beyond my control. Everywhere else, it's the marketing division and not the editorial division which calls the shots*' – Hoshang Merhcant, in an interview with R. Raj Rao, 2009 (emphasis mine)

The label 'gay' takes life in its many uses. It cannot be disconnected from these uses, or considered something unchangeable while its own uses alter. It is riveted to them and changes its significances and meanings in tandem with them. Within the enterprise of Hoshang editing a collection of 'gay writings' from India, one of its major use had little to with the body of the writer or of the editor, little to do with making an implicit connection between the act of contributing to the anthology and the 'erotic awareness' of the contributor, little to do with being gay at all. It was about the practicality of being published where the category of 'gay writer' was a route to getting there, and to getting there more frequently. It was about, somehow, gaining the difficult and eluding object, that of literary fame.

It had become amply clear within hours of talking with Hoshang that he, like many others of his writerly ilk, valued moments when his poetry had been publicly appreciated, when he had been listed with the major contemporary writers and poets of his city, nation or time. He had kept a minute record and photocopies of all the news clippings which had featured him. He savoured them and shared them with me. He recounted episodes when he had been invited by a University, by an Academy or by friends for doing readings from his work. He clung to those moments and tried to extract as much substance from them. In arranging this tapestry of recognition and fame around him, Hoshang had inevitably given other writers and poets their places in it, often to his own discredit. He had a very self-conscious relationship with some of the other writers, whose international reputation, he think he had not matched or could not hope to match. 'I think just now,' he told me, 'my personality comes in the way of my writing but when I'm removed, when I'm gone, they'll settle, they'll see my writing, and appreciate it.' (prsnl interview *ibid.*). This feeling was both of resignation and love, of bitterness and self-mocking irony.

The Indian English writer Vikram Seth, he told me, had also first said no to being in his collection when he had requested him personally. Later, when the Penguin associate editor and Hoshang's former student V. Karthika made the same request, he had agreed and given 31 stanzas from his verse novel 'The Golden Gate', the stanzas which follow through the relationship between his Californian characters Phil and Ed. Hoshang was minced about the fact that Seth had given him the 'Christian atonement and guilt passages' from his novel rather than the 'sexy squeals' that he had wanted (*ibid.*). It mattered little, in Hoshang's nitpicking, that

Seth's Gate barely had any sexy squeals to offer, always resigning as it did into the narratorial 'Dear Reader' when the situation promised to lead to any casual sexual description.

With Shahid too, Hoshang had a very self-conscious relationship over letters and phone. He never met him in person. Shahid, he told me, used to reply to his enthusiastic and excited poems, translations and criticisms with a calm prose, never rude but always functional and without any further leads or questions. 'It was the lack of intimacy,' Hoshang wrote in one of his essays on Shahid, 'which hurt me in Ali's letters and phone calls...over a seven-year period' (2007: 467). 'I was a sulker,' Hoshang said, 'but 'Shahid was never that, he was 'very urbane' and 'hard to ruffle'. There was an impenetrability about him that Hoshang could never break through and that impenetrability had a lot to do with Shahid being increasingly acknowledged and lauded, certainly by the early-90s, as a significant poet around in the United States and in Kashmir and India. Hoshang was conscious of the fact that he was talking to a 'greater' writer who could choose or refuse to be in his anthology.

It is in this light, in this web of relationships between editors and their writers, that we can see another dimension of the category of 'gay writing'. This is its role as a publishing phenomenon, as a mobilizer of a niche market, as a creator of an audience for one's work. After a point in the interview, being uneasy with his own platitudes about who can and who cannot write for a 'gay anthology,' and impatient with my questions, Hoshang had given me one short stare and said, as if he was now telling me the real thing, '...see baba, there is always a plethora of things around, so you have to mark territories, actually, I don't care much for the category itself...it is because I get publicity as a gay writer that I become, once in a while, a chakki ['eunuch'] [claps

his hands]’ (ibid.). ‘Gay’ is less of a bodily category here and more of a commercial one. It is a way of making writing marketable.

In March, 2007 a young British writer Will Davis published his first novel ‘My Side of the Story’ about a sixteen year old boy Jarold, ‘a gay main character’ in Davis’s own words (2007). In an interview after the publication of the book, the then twenty seven year old author was asked whether he considered himself to be ‘a gay writer’. The question took him a little while to think, and he responded, he later admitted, with ‘the usual crap’ (ibid.).

‘I answered along the lines of “I don’t want to be pigeonholed...my book isn’t geared towards any specific readership...I hope it has something to offer everyone.’ But soon beginning to have an idea about the trade of book publishing, a few months into his first novel, Davis wrote an article in the Guardian to recant on his former equivocalness about being a ‘gay writer’. He turned coats with a rationale that was not about him per se, or even the character in his novel, but about the contingency of book sales and of speedily acquiring a name in the business of writing.

He offered an economic explanation, not an expressive one or a body-centered one, of ‘gay writing’. He approached the same category from a different entry-point all together. Now that he had his ‘one eye perpetually trained on book sales’ and given his ‘precarious position as a first time author’, the last thing he wanted to do, he said, was to ‘rock his boat by discouraging potential readers.’

“my position probably ought to reflect the places my book has so far got the most reception: it is the gay-oriented magazines and papers that have shown the greatest interest in it. And since it is notoriously difficult for new novelists to get reviews and attention, if for no better reason, I think I’m going to define myself out of gratitude. So do I be a gay writer? Hell, yes.” (ibid.)

Hoshang has many uses for the badge of a 'gay writer' and one of its primary uses is in the context of 'gay writing' as a publication venture. 'Gay' is unhooked here from the body of the writer and is grafted primarily on his prospects in the publishing market. From being seen mainly as a personal condition, it becomes more decidedly a commercially exigent badge. This is in response to the changes in the book publishing and marketing trade. Ever since the late twentieth century, particularly from the 80s onwards in Europe and America, there has been a sizable amount of writings that have been published under the aegis of 'gay publishing houses' and have been slotted in bookshops under separate shelves producing their own niche sales. Even as far back as 1940s, C.V. Terry, in reviewing Gore Vidal's 'The City and the Pillar', the story of the handsome Virginia boy Jim Willard, for 'The New York Times', had already clubbed together books 'about' homosexuals and seen them as a cohesive marketable (or unmarketable) thing, as forming a 'shelf' unto its own - '[p]resented as the case history of a standard homosexual,' he wrote for Vidal's book, 'this novel adds little that is new to a groaning shelf' (1948). 'Gay writing' and 'gay publishing' had responded to the urgent need, felt acutely in the 80s and the 90s and propelled by gay and lesbian activism, to tell more and more coming-out stories and gear them towards the specialized audience whose lives it would hope to reflect or to whom it would speak urgently. During these decades, 'gay writing' as an advertising tool was doing something unique, it was bringing together and concretizing, sometimes out of thin air, a sense of a 'gay audience' as an independent buying and reading entity. In doing this, it was often using the larger cultural currency of the 'gay community' to instill a sense of participation. 'What do advertisers buy with their advertising expenditures,' Dallas W. Smythe had asked, at

the beginning of the 80s, in his watershed essay on the relationship between advertising and audiences in the American markets, “[w]hat they buy,’ he argued,

‘...are the services of audiences with predictable specifications which will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and third-class mail) in particular market areas. As collectivities, these audiences are commodities.’ (1981: 27)

Davis and Hoshang, in the situations mentioned above, are trying to latch onto this ‘gay audience’ which the marketing offices of gay publication houses, in particular, are also in the process of producing. Audiences, if they have to be profitable, Smythe had observed from his 1970s archives of television viewership records in the States and in Canada, are never to be treated as an unspecialized whole. ‘The audience commodities,’ he argued, ‘bear specifications known in the business as “the demographics”’ (ibid.). These demographics are always specialized. Television producers in the States and in Canada, in the 70s, used to divide their ‘total viewers’ into ‘adults’, ‘children’, ‘teenagers’, ‘men’, ‘women’ *et. al.*. In more recent times these demographics, the ‘statistical abstractions’ (ibid. 49) necessary for the television business, have only multiplied in North America, as elsewhere, to include ‘gay and lesbian’, ‘ethnic minorities’ and other specialized niches. Hoshang was doing precisely this market speak when he told me that ‘there is always a plethora of things around, so you have to mark territories’ (he had concluded one of his essays on Ali with - ‘[a] minority identity...is a creation of culture, rather than a material fact in the real world’ (2007)). ‘Gay’ for him becomes the provisional mode through which to integrate his book into the market sales patterns where, as Bill Livant put it, ‘[v]irtually everyone is organized into the complex tapestry of...audiences’ (quoted in ibid.). ‘Gay,’ here, is no different from ‘kids’, ‘adults’ or ‘crime’ that ritually mark the shelving patterns in a book store. Different stocking patterns in a bookstore create different sets of



demands among the readers, and by catering in terms of these groups, they also instigate a sense in the audience of briefly participating, of briefly being attached to these groups. Terms have different implication patterns in different contexts, what they imply varies with their settings. 'Gay', here, is a market shorthand and this implication, as a tool meant for convenience of product selection, takes precedence over the term's other implications, or at the very least, messes the sequence of its meanings. One chooses to call oneself a 'gay writer', depending not on who one sleeps with, but instead on what sales the category is likely to trigger.

This convenient doubleness inherent in the category of 'gay writing' also means that it has an uncertain lease of life as a practical label. For audience categories are not unchangeable. They respond to market forces and alter in consonance with them. 'For one thing,' Livant noted about audience demographics, 'the production, destruction, division and recombination of audiences is a vast and turbulent motion' (quoted in *ibid.*). They are liable to become less or more effective over time.

Already by the early years of the twenty first century, the excitement related to 'gay publishing' was showing signs of dampening in Europe and America. Michael Denny, senior editor at St. Martin's Press, one of United States' largest publishers, spoke to Martin Arnold about the 'quiet phase' in gay and lesbian book publishing. This phase, he said, is 'a puzzle to me...[w]hether it's that people who were active for 20 years are getting out of publishing and the gay movement, or whether the genre has become integrated, or something else is happening -- I don't know...What I do know is that the gay movement and gay publishing seems to be between times' (quoted in Arnold, 2001).

Arnold, trying to make sense of this transition phase, noted that there are not as many coming-out or self-realization stories produced by gay publishers now. That form of writing seems to have lived its life as the gay movement reaps more successes and makes more political and social inroads in western European and American countries. The palette of 'gay writing' has expanded so far as to threaten the umbrella term itself. 'As the themes become more universal,' he pointed out, 'the possibility of crossover sales is greater and gay writers and their publishers not only want their writing to be displayed in bookstores' gay and lesbian sections but also on the A to Z shelves' (ibid.). The niche gay and lesbian bookshop 'Gay's the Word' in central London, for the last several years, has been repeatedly making claims of declining sales and just about managing to stay afloat.

In India, the commercially viable period for specifically 'gay' and 'lesbian' publications was discovered in the late-nineties by Penguin books when it produced the first collections of 'gay' and 'lesbian' writings in 1999. Talking of the moment when his co-edited volume *Same Sex Love* was published in the year 2000 in India, Saleem Kidwai told Gautam Bhan that he realizes 'in retrospect that we were then on the verge of a new phase of gay writing...Before us,' he said, 'there were only two serious books – by Rakesh Ratti and Giti Thadani. Ratti's book – *A Lotus of Another Colour* – sort of hung in the air. There was simply no history or community for it to stand on. Ashwini Sukhthankar's *Facing the Mirror*...came a year after ours. Each book has built a readership and a community since then (quoted in Bhan; 2007: 53). The end of the 2000s has seen the setting up of 'India's first online LGBT bookstore' called Queer Ink under the ownership of Shobhna S. Kumar who lives in Mumbai. About the same time, Mumbai also saw the opening of 'India's First LGBT Pride Store', Azaad Bazaar ('Free Market'). Different books,

released in India in the last decade, have used the marketing pitch of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ writing. In the same interview, Kidwai notices a change from the moment of publication of his own co-edited book to the mid-late 2000s, ‘*Same Sex Love*,’ he said, ‘was published through the back door by Macmillan India who publish textbooks because no mainstream publisher would publish us. They did nothing to distribute it or promote it. It was bookstores,’ he pointed out, ‘who would harass them because people were asking. And this was after we had been published abroad with good reviews and no controversy. Today the book is in demand and is going to be reissued by Penguin’ (*ibid.* 54-5). Bhan questions the co-editors further. What I find particularly interesting is the remoulding maneuver that the co-editors Kidwai and Vanita do with Bhan’s questions. Issues of social acceptance, of what will be approved, are rearranged more as issues of marketability, of what will sell:

‘GB: But do you think there still remains a difference when it comes from major publishing house?

We know that bookstores are still hesitant to take books that are open about sexuality when they don’t come under big publishing brands. For example, with *Because I Have a Voice*, we found that bookstores were happy to carry it once the *Hindustan Times* and *Times of India* had carried reviews. These reviews gave the book legitimacy. Do you think we should take this seriously as one of the reasons why we in India don’t have more people [this was 2007] – gay or straight – writing about sexuality, and especially writing popular fiction?

RV [Ruth Vanita]: *I don’t think that’s a barrier. I think the bookstores are willing to carry any book that they think will sell.*

SK: Books always appear in stages. *People will store books that will sell.* I’m closely associated with a bookstore in a small town. I know that the only copies left of *Same-Sex Love in India* are now with that small town bookstore because it’s out of print, and that’s where people order it from now, at a higher price. It’s interesting, the book is selling more now than it was in the middle period –

something which is indicative of a change. I think the life of a book cannot be judged within a year or two of its birth.

GB: *So you don't think there is a hesitancy on the part of bookstores in keeping books on homosexuality?*

SK: *I don't think there is a bias.*

RV: *They'll look at the cover, the title, what is marketable. It's about what they think will sell' (ibid. 55, emphasis mine)*

This later moment is marked by the market trend in India that is palatable to the category of 'gay writing', one in which it is seen as a viable product. Yet reviewers, and writers, have begun to simultaneously point out why 'gay writing' might be holding back writers from 'crossing-over' into greater literary acclaim and sales. Reviewing the Indian-American writer Rahul Mehta's collection of short-stories *Quarantine* (2010), for the 'Business Standard', Nilanjana S. Roy noted that '[i]t would be unfair to stereotype Quarantine as just a collection of "gay writings", any more than John Updike's short stories are just a collection of writings about hetero relationships' (2010). The category of 'gay writing' remains contested, constantly buffeted in the ebb and flow of the motivations of publishers and authors, sales and fame, reviewers and readers.

These marketing trends indicate mutability of the category of 'gay' and 'lesbian writing' and irreversibly proves that there are several routes through which the writer can be linked to what she produces and that there is nothing given or implicit about this connection. Sexuality-specific writing will continue to remain in circulation, based less on what sexual orientation the writer says she has or what sexual-orientation the characters in the book have, but instead on how much sales the generic label will be able to trigger. This kind of doubleness of the terms 'lesbian'

or 'gay' will see them through their lease of popular use in different regions and markets, till whenever they can last.

## **Doubleness as Politics: Final Remarks**

Doubleness is at the heart of the political project. To be political is to be double. It is to realize that expressions makes sense in their contexts and are liable to revisions, even reversals, if these contexts are shifted. Being political is keeping track of this doubleness, and out of its messiness come up with temporarily articulate forms that serve their time and use, that are precisely articulated because of their time and use. Always wedged in between an ideal mandate and a less than ideal reality, to be political is to constantly try to bridge this divide. It is to keep working out how the on-the-ground situation can be approximated to its theoretical ideals, which are their doubles, their guiding models. It is also to celebrate when the practical itself, the strategic, doubles up as its own ideal situation; when within the exhausting terrain of the political, moments of embrace between the theoretical and the practical emerge, even if fleeting.

In the latter half of this first decade behind us, I have seen a particularly exemplary case of such doubleness as it emerged in the queer politics in Delhi. I saw it on intimate grounds, participating in it through some of my closest friendships, learning from these friends both as a political apprentice and as a member of an unusual kind of joint family (it easily allowed itself to be thought of, and romanticized, as another ‘family’). It was this moment that I spent working with the queer collective called *Nigah* (‘perspective’ or ‘gaze’ in Urdu) that I mentioned in the beginning of this thesis. It was based in Delhi and at any given moment in the three to four years that I remained active within it, it had eight to ten members, sometimes more, at others, less. This collective, which was a close-knit network of friends, both like-minded and crazily

argumentative, organized a variety of events like screenings, demonstrations, and college workshops in order to, as we claimed on our web space, create 'safe spaces' for the expression of queer people and its unhindered sustenance in Delhi, to 'reclaim' a city which was special to each one of us in many ways. Most of us were between twenty and thirty-five. At the end of my bachelors programme in literature at Hindu College in DU, and while I was doing my masters in the same subject across the road at St. Stephens, I got introduced to and suitably meddled (I use the word without its sense of interloping but with its sense of curiosity and immersion) in the many politics of *Nigah*. When I create this story in retrospect - and this too is form of doubleness, to live something first and then to create a narrative out of it later, try to understand it in other terms - I see a form of doubleness so implicit in the way that this group worked that it was more like habit, which sometimes was consciously realized as political strategy.

Most of the members were fluent in English (all spoke more than just English) and were aware, more or less, of the political models at hand for doing the kind of sexuality politics they intended. It was here that I first learned a basic form of doubling, then with a sense of discovery only recent graduates are capable of - between 'queer' and 'gay'. Two words, two strategies that always went along with the group, never losing either but always inflecting each other. One of the members of *Nigah*, Gautam Bhan and his friend Arvind Narrain, had been the editors of the first volume of *Because I Have a Voice* which was the subject of discussion in the fourth chapter. It had come out in the middle of the decade from a small independent, and now growing, press - Yoda. Gautam and Arvind - in their mid-twenties then and freshly finished with their graduate courses, in the U.S. and in India - were, like several of their friends, fellow

activists and mentors, doing something very peculiar. They were reinventing the very first (ten year long) wave of 'sexuality' activism and in urban India from within the lens of 'queer politics' that had seen its crest in the 90s in American and European academia, in the works of Eve Sedgwick and Michael Warner, and among sections of sexuality activism in the United States, a climate that both the editors were deeply familiar with.

This doubleness between 'queer' and 'gay' took several forms. Whereas the collective, in its group statement and its event invites, did not desist from using terms of sexual identity like lesbian, gay and bisexual (using them frequently, with pride, with obviousness), it always, sometimes smartly and at others clumsily, mentioned that it understood these identities in a particular way. The doubleness was in the way they framed this political equation. They understood lesbian, gay *et. al.* as a provisional space of identities, rather than a compartment unto each, one inexhaustible by another, and yet always more interconnected than they appear. Queer was the name we gave to this space, something that held them together and reinterpreted each of them in its own light. Queer was a vacant frame that mobilized a perspective, a way of seeing things, *nigah*. Its content were any of those identities that were at odds with any coercive social norms. In this sense, lesbian and gay, were in the same league as Hijras might be, single women might be, as Dalit laborers might be, or as a migrants trying to work out their small businesses in the teeming city might be. All of these were, in some way or the other, at odds with their living environments, collided with it on an everyday basis, some more than others at given times. Where 'gay' was often seen as an individual condition, as a proud rallying point for freedom, 'queer' was a political standpoint and an alliance making to realize that freedom. This was, at times, certainly less than successful, especially in taking up



the issue of class access and caste politics, we did not choose to focus on caste specifically in most of the queer work we did in Delhi. So this vision of 'queer' was realized to more and less of an extent at different times.

It was only in the later years of its existence, that we at *Nigah* collectively poured more effort into translating each of the public material in Hindi. Some screenings, as some members, were always more inclined towards a 'gay' form of politics geared towards 'coming out' and complete visibility while others tried to expand this template, or see how it might be more flexible to begin with than they had realized in their fury of the 'queer' mandate, in their often unsubtle debate with the gaywallah friends. Theoretically, 'queer' brings us together based on what we believe whereas 'gay' is hedged on what we are. Over the years, *Nigah* became a site for a constant conversation between these two ideas and between their practitioners who overlapped unpredictably at different times. 'Queer', with its emphasis on finding similarities of 'marginalization' (being at a slant to society) with other social groups, effectively mobilizes a form of politics that reinvents 'gay'. It filters 'gay' less as a 'lifestyle' choice (with its immense rhetoric of freedom) and uses it, still as the word 'gay', more as a political view from where the world looks a little different, where the movement itself looks more than a single-issue movement. It recruits a bigger template of alliances and subjects that the lifestyle frame allows. It is, one might even say, less self-important a political mode and more willing to take on board questions that, at first glance, do not seem 'directly relevant' to the mandate of its activism, but are discovered to be at the core of its concerns. This doubleness became especially relevant, for instance, when the group discussed it internally whether it should, as a group, sign on petitions that asked for an international probe into human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan

government authorities in its offensive against the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam) and its own civilians. It had to then ask for itself: when is it that, as activists say, we *do* sexuality? What does this *doing* look like? Is association with anti-corporatized-development programmes or mass-based movements for the 1984 Bhopal Gas disaster victims also *doing* sexuality activism in some sense, even if it looks that we are moving out of the given script in some ways? Is it revising this script? By such an alliance making, does it become a way to bring 'sexuality' - often considered in India to be a less 'serious' issue than class, caste or corruption - onto the agendas of other social movements. It was the doubleness at the heart of political terms that allowed *Nigah* then to have these conversations and to keep churning its political outlooks as it went along. That was the way that so many of its members – themselves associated intimately with other movements – grew up and learned, changed their strategies, remained in or left the group. That was the way they lived out the connections that queer activism is bound to have with the world around it, and have unapologetically.

It is not a coincidence that we end with remarks on doubleness, set within a political moment in Delhi's queer history that exemplifies that words are used strategically in court-rooms, in street protests, in personal musings and in homes. That we articulate words specifically to mean something in some situations, for them to do some political work, and that they might sometimes get out of hand, stop doing that work, which is when we need to reinvigorate them. That all words have implications politically, and that they can be as dynamic as they can fatigue, that there is nothing within them that shall implicitly make them unreasonably durable. This thesis has travelled through several worlds, some more passing, some more persistent, but its

main crux is that of simultaneity, of the double game, that formats situations and actors of same-sex desire in modern India.

This work would not have done its job if it cannot persuade its readers of the deeply political work that simultaneity does, the simultaneity of archives, activisms and people. If it were not for the deeply political acknowledgement that sexual identities, like the theories which seek to displace them, are both part of this double game of simultaneity, it would have been a far more sclerotic movement and human actors we would be dealing with. If we cease to read doubleness in terms, where it almost leaps out at us, they would increasingly mean the same thing, they - 'gay', 'lesbian', 'samlaingik' or 'queer' - would harden if we desert their implicit potential of being used in many ways. The idea of doubleness should persuade us otherwise.

I end with an example from Britain where most of this work was written. This example is relevant, not only because in the world that we live today, we are far more implicated in each others lives and politics more than ever before, but also because the authorial signature at the end of the thesis should acknowledge the place – both muse and obstacle – where it could produce this work, the place which is the site of this work and also remains cited in it. Near the end of this last decade, under the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition government, Brenda Namigadde, a Ugandan asylum seeker in the U.K., had had her application rejected by the first-tier tribunal immigration judge. Brenda had claimed that she was 'lesbian' and that she had escaped from Uganda because she feared that there was a distinct danger to her life in her own country because of her sexual preference. Matthew Coats, head of immigration at the U.K. Border Agency, explained the reason for the rejection of her asylum application. 'Ms Namigadde's case has been carefully considered by both the UK Border Agency and the courts

on two separate occasions and she has been found not to have a right to remain here' (Coats: Jan, 2011). He added that '[a]n immigration judge found on the *evidence* before him that Ms Namigadde was not homosexual' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). It is this evidence – the judge finds ways to prove a 'homosexual' – that is the biggest proof why we should continue using words in as many ways as possible and not let them crust around one meaning or sector. This example is also an evidence of the many ways the word 'homosexual' has travelled in the last century. The tribunal judgment read as a statement of confirmation of how one strong strand of gay and lesbian politics in the U.K., as in so many other places, has lately culminated in too much time, energy and resources being given over to creating more and more consumption-driven spaces for the coming together of and expression by 'gay' and 'lesbian' people, so much so, that these often become the iconic ways of understanding the words themselves and the people they come to denote. 'Gay' or 'lesbian' would seem to shortchange simultaneity when they are seen as lifestyles alone, lived as if with particular set rituals of consumption in set sectors – mainly entertainment, tourism and beauty and clothing retail. The immigration judge had made this lesbian-as-lifestyle his main 'evidence' of judging the very person's claim to her sexual preference, he saw 'homosexuality' proved only when some specific lifestyle conditions were met - 'I find,' he wrote,

'that the Appellant was not and is not, on the evidence before me, a lesbian. I find that her credibility is affected by her conduct. I am not obliged to accept her say...I find such peripheral information to describe what went on, either in Uganda or in the United Kingdom, very generalised and quite simply lacking in the kind of detail and information of someone genuinely living that lifestyle. The Appellant claims to have freedom to live a life unconstrained and without prejudice. I find the information as to how she has done so over the lengthy period she has been in the United Kingdom singularly lacking in detail or coherence. The Appellant appears to have taken no interest in forms of media by magazines, books or other information

relating to her sexual orientation. Whilst there is no requirement to do so it does seem strange, if she is exercising the real sense of freedom she claims, that she does not do so' (quoted in *WGLB*; Jan: 2011)

The 'real sense of freedom' has to be plucked out whenever it threatens to entrench itself in *some* magazines, in *some* 'details', in *some* genuine 'lifestyle'. The 'freedom to live a life unconstrained and without prejudice' is also to have the freedom to script one's own desires and the ways we put them to practice, the names we might or might not give them and the different families we create for ourselves outside any propaganda that tells us what ideal gay families or real lesbian individuals should look like<sup>61</sup>. Freedom has always been a learning and an unlearning, from the 'scene', from the movement politics, from the market. It is to realize and work with the difference – of desires, names and places – but never to impose a necessary difference even if the script, of the market, of NGOs, of funding bodies, demands it, thereby relishing a sameness with others that never lets distinctions harden into hostilities. Freedom, and sexual freedom in particular, finally has to be married with other freedoms – that of the immigrant, the refugee, the poor, the gendered and the Dalit - never immune to them and always keeping them in the loop, without apology, without moving outside the 'sexuality' mandate, and foremost, equipped with the perspective that sees them as nothing but together, as nothing but symbiotic. This is how freedom will be worked out in detail, when it will look more all-over-the-place (both in its sense of headiness and reach) than it sometimes seems. For we know, it is only when 'the real sense of freedom' is framed this way, that we realize that

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<sup>61</sup> Rajiv Bera, who works on the issues of asylum and sexuality in the U.K., told me that asylum applicants in the U.K. who apply using the basis of persecution of 'homosexuality' in their home countries sometimes duplicate the specific format and content of previously successful applications in order to strengthen their own chance of success in what is an increasingly immigration-unfriendly country. This is another evidence of the necessarily complex relationships people have with law, and of the necessary distance they have with their own strategic self-representations to it (Bera; prsnl comm: July, 2011).

freedoms for some can be accounted as complete only when they spell freedom for others as well.

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## **Personally Conducted Interviews**

Charan, July 2007, New Delhi.

D'Souza, Rahul, March, 2007, New Delhi.

Kidwai, Saleem, July 2010, Lucknow.

Merchant, Hoshang, July, 2010, Hyderabad.

Jens, February 2010, prsnl email, London.

## Errata

- Pg. 12: 'onto' should be 'on to'.
- Pg. 20: 'pore into it' should be 'explore it'.
- Pg. 33: 'of' before 'slum-dwellers' to be deleted.
- Pg. 53: 'where in' should be 'wherein'.
- Pg. 54: 'questions' should be 'question'.
- Pg. 58: 'of sort' should be 'a sort'.
- Pg. 59: 'a' before 'survey' to be deleted.
- Pg. 63: 'toppled towards' should be 'on'.
- Pg. 77: 'knowledge to' should be 'knowledge of'.
- Pg. 79: 'favor' should be 'favour'.
- Pg. 91: 'on ground' should be 'on the ground'.
- Pg. 96: 'th' after '7' to be deleted, 'rumors' should be 'rumours'.
- Pg. 97: 'one fifty two' should be 'one hundred and fifty two'.
- Pg. 105: 'masseuse' should be 'masseur'.
- Pg. 116: 'insists' should be 'inserts'; 'both' after 'It' to be deleted.
- Pg. 119: 'integral in' should be 'integral to'.
- Pg. 129: 'traveler' should be 'traveller'.
- Pg. 153: 'rupa' should be '*rupa*'.
- Pg. 171: 'Rich said' should be 'Rich said it'.
- Pg. 186: 'a' before 'the ghazal' to be deleted.
- Pg. 187: 'syamwar' should be '*syamwar*'.
- Pg. 187: 'upto' should be 'up to'.
- Pg. 189: 'the large extent' should be 'a large extent'.
- Pg. 190: 'activists on ground' should be 'activists on the ground'.
- Pg. 191: 'a year worth' should be 'a year's worth'.

Pg. 192: 'upto' should be 'up to'

Pg. 194: 'behavior' should be 'behaviour'.

Pg. 197: 'Berkely' should be 'Berkeley'.

Pg. 198: 'the' after 'the' to be deleted.

Pg. 200: 'such distribution' should be 'such as distribution'.

Pg. 210: 'counseling' should be 'counselling'.

Pg. 210: 'labeled' should be 'labelled'.

Pg. 246: 'determine' should be 'determines'.

Pg. 257: 'friend' should be 'friends'.

Pg. 266: 'there are more than one ways' should be 'there is more than one way'.

Pg. 275: 'he think he' should be 'he thought'.

Pg. 277: 'all together' should be 'altogether'.

Pg. 282: 'twon' should be 'town'.

Pg. 286: 'is form' should be 'is a form'.

Pg. 287: 'Its content were' should be 'It was made up of'.

Pg. 287: 'laborers' should be 'labourers'.

\* 'center' should be 'centre', 'centers' should be 'centres': Pg. 90, 92, 146.

\* 'favoritist' should be 'favouritist', 'favorite' should be 'favourite': Pg. 94, 106, 144, 157, 176, 229, 253, 267.

\* 'maneuver' should be 'manoeuvre', 'maneuvered' should be 'manoeuvred', 'maneuverability' should be 'manoeuverability', 'maneuverable' should be 'manoeuverable': Pg. 59, 98, 130, 133, 144, 147, 149, 269, 282.

\* 'neighborhoods' should be 'neighbourhoods', 'neighboring' should be 'neighbouring': Pg. 101, 130, 132.

\* 'program' should be 'programme': Pg. 35, 87.